

Poemathon with Older People (March 2021)

INTREPID INTRUDER

First and last lines by John Sheahan,

A collaborative response poem with some 355 contributors

An initiative of Poetry Ireland with the Global Brain Health Institute
(Trinity College Dublin) and Neuroscience Ireland

Here is the tale of all we have experienced during this time of crisis. Its catalyst was the Covid-19 pandemic. In its richness, it is a cherry tree in full bloom, or a mountainside covered in the bright excitement of blossoming gorse.

Heaney once spoke of poetry as devoted to surprise, 'maybe in a rhyme, maybe in a way of seeing'. In this Poemathon of responses to John Sheahan's first line, 'Intrepid intruder, stalker of unwashed hands' we find a river of surprises, a thriving sense of wonder, and many ways of seeing, often as visionary as haiku might be. In its narrative moments, it reflects human behaviour and relationship as subtly, or bluntly, as a short story might.

My task as editor was to honour the words and lines contributed in a form that would hold their integrity. I believe this has been achieved, because this work is full of surprise, of keen perception, of kindnesses, of tragedy, pain and disappointment. But it also sparkles with life, joy, honesty and hope.

Seamus Cashman, Editor

I

In My Winter Garden

Intrepid intruder, stalker of unwashed hands
Harbinger of eyes, only seen, and lost hugs
Invisible monster, conquering our lands
Seeking contacts in this age of con-munication
Masking the nation, from itself and from each other.
It feasts on love and harmony, endangers our cultured souls.

Rain drizzles on the car which hasn't moved since Lockdown
The beech tree is all butterscotch fingers this grey day.
Mass said behind closed doors, mostly broadcast live,
 while funerals and weddings are confined
 to twenty-five, sometimes ten.
Memories left unopened on the kitchen shelf.
 Left there idly by a former self.
Coiled beneath blankets, mother and daughter
 separated by country, both felled,
 you Covid sick, me heartsick!
My newborn grandchild I wish I could hold.
My asthmatic breath fears this worldwide killer
Schools and businesses closing their doors,
 pubs have stopped trading, no more Guinness or Coors
A silver moon over Jerusalem's gilded dome
 silently watches a new tragedy unfold.
Another day book-worming, 06:30am is too early for coffee

You have frowned on hugs and kisses from our puzzled
grandchildren waving uncertainly, from beyond
mute garden-gnomes.

I have finally realised I am the reincarnation of Belaqua,
epitome of indolence and laziness, ebullient in defiance.
And waiting, waiting, waiting for what's coming

Heartsick I crave for the silence to end
I miss the breath of your voice on my face.
Waiting, watching, wanting, no one comes.
Masked strangers wondering on isolated roads
desperately seeking connection
Fingernails kelled with peat from our lands
No care no feeling and knows no bounds
Can I read my confessional poetry?
Words not texts might dissipate the silence
Seek the highest achievement, a happy marriage
Such love I have found in this time of need.
In my winter garden a waterfall flows.

II

Did I Stand Too Close?

Intrepid intruder, stalker of unwashed hands
Breath taker, heartbreaker, widow maker
Creeping covertly, breathless, insidious
My aged days fear your fraughtful fangs
Harbinger of hostile ways
Like a snake at the bat cave, suspended you pounce

Taibhse faoi chónaí
Mo gráin go daingean thú, idir lá ist oíche
sneaking silently, invading open orifices.
No borders to break for, an empty suitcase full of possibilities.
We stumble in darkness dreading where the serpent lies.
Sameness melding into sameness, blurring the markers of our lives
Looking out, Looking in, Looking back, Looking forward!
Now we live in another world, an interval —
You have traversed seas and ravaged people; slammed shut
 the comfort of open church-door;
 redundant now under mossy steeple.
And covid brought the curtain down.
Simple pleasures light up my shrinking world
A walk on the Velvet Strand invigorates.
Daily now, I walk the corridor to nowhere
One wonders, did I stand too close?

Waking every morning to wonder, 'Why am I still here?'
Home is still and lonely where grandkids used to play
The lockdown liturgies snagged on the cocoon casings,
Let go of everything I think I know
Garden birds furtive or hungry or the gentle thaw of overnight ice;
pristine and all a glimmer; or a distant dog's bark
and before dark a sunset in the west full of promise
and colour; tomorrow a new hope
and encouragement for one another.

Deliverer of fear at a level unknown to this generation, a thief of
time.

Tempering us to be vigilant, the world is now in our hands.
Unwelcome unseen you glide in and without a care you take my
very breath

Your presence intrusive as invaders in a foreign land
Invader of our bodies, conqueror of many lands' land
Ushered into battle against droplets
Unwittingly spreading, we answer it's commands
Reflected in your eyes, mirrored by your soul
Who speaks now for them and me?

Stealthy silencer of stanza uncover my words
New words, Wuhan and Covid-19

This humble assailant of our time, with its petal shaped projections,
has spawned a glut of other words, now woven
into the fabric of our "new normal" lives
and embedded into the rounds of daily conversations
— epidemic, pandemic, social-distancing, cocooning,
lockdown, frontline-death, frontline worker
And zoom, spike, furlough, flatten the curve

Herd immunity, contact tracing, PPE, POD and viral loads
New normals, bubbles, staycationing, facemasks, coronacuts...

Intrepid intruder, stalker of unwashed hands

Shows no mercy as it claims victims throughout the lands
The pain it causes no one can understand
Except those who give everything to its vicious commands
People in shock people in pain
People who gasp trying to get some air
People who cry people who stare
People watch this in despair
People who see this thing mutilate
Others trying to stop it as they isolate
Families putting their loved ones underground
As if they didn't exist – without a sound
The world is sad, our children scream
When will we see our friends again
I don't know as I try to evade
But I hope God has the answer
In the vaccines that are made.

III

Spinning Out of Control

Intrepid intruder, stalker of unwashed hands

A squatter seeking solace in the innocent,
Making yourself at home, having come from foreign lands.
Isolate the darkness, shine on
Creator of the opportunity to reconnect with the land,
Binding us together, tearing us apart.
Silent. invisible, bands of fear.

Yet, 'Love, laughter, good health and happiness' is now our mantra.
Small children playing shop, making pies out of mud.
Nanna's arms ache, our wee Scot is two!
I wish I was a blackbird, because it wouldn't matter,
and, 'If I was a Blackbird I'd whistle and sing"...
We spend our days locked in lockdown, we have no future
until its clear, it must clear...

It's very mixed up.

We are spinning spinning out of control, so so fast, and we don't
know where we are going, we never knew
so we just keep spinning, round and round,
way too fast...way too fast

We never knew how lucky we were,
and we were so so lucky, we just never knew

Our weak conquered, terrorised by data
while this warlike affliction clouds our lands

And what if what I fear is that my life has had no purpose,
no meaning? What then?

We thought we had learned it all, now know how little,
learning late what was important

Discovering new ways to do old things
going differing paths to purchase the beans
and earlier rising for art work at the harbour
and coffee at the train station carpark garden,
and ambles to the sea: before breakfast
—just right for me

With my inner narration a companion and charm.

During a heatwave I read her suicide letter

Oh, silent walls, why don't you answer back?

Guilt free solitude, fewer obligations, time to nature watch,
So I will lay in the sand dunes and dream of beauty,
embroidered across the skies in glory.

I'm wait for news, daily news, Covid-19 news, but, most important,
family news.

Yesterday is gone; live for today; tomorrow is only a promise.

So which would you rather, time before or after?

Carbolic soap became closer to me than my family.

"Wise men will council, Fools still question sound logic."

Wandering minstrel, exiled in the far off lands

We olden oaks sway in your silent storm, some fall,
but our hearts hold strong

The flatness of this year: my grandkids shrunk to two dimensions.

A phantom foreboding of a future unravelling.

You came uninvited, you ravaged our land

Invading our space with your Sputnik spikes
Thieving our undanced dances, non-returned glances, un-sated
romances

There is, never was and never will be a new normal.
On the hamster wheel of life sometimes stopping never getting off
OK! How long is this going on for, must I again cocoon?
More concise and to the point, what we reap is what we sow.
Deterred by distance, suppressed by separation.
I wander lonely as a leaf
Locked down, locked tight, sealed beyond a doubt.
We have to hold on for the light to return
Shut in, shut out, exhausting times.

Lovely lockdown: regression to a womb of care
On your small wooden box, I sprinkle like a blessing
a blackbird's song
before the last glimmer of daylight fades.
Deadly destroyer of innocent souls.
What good would we be without our hands washed or unwashed.
Like intruders of old, conquered by habitual behaviour.
Longer were the days, shorter was the time.
It closed the theatres and silenced the bands.
Playing with my gorgeous man, slowly sucking his lungs to a husk.
Death is an integral part of life...
Alone, not lonely, memories keep us close
Cocooned. Out of sight. Vaccination imminent. Dreaming.

IV

A Cold Wind Blew

Intrepid intruder, stalker of unwashed hands

Tormenter of mind and soul

Burglar stealing our years as we try to withstand

Feeling vulnerable, as I sit here alone

Landline lifeline, frail filament to love

Lost souls, lost senses, hope is shapeless in the interlude

He shielded with the armour of sad solitude

A silent Christmas dinner for one.

Throughout this longest night, we've dreamed of a new dawn
With faces covered peering at the world through steamed up glass.

And then, a silent cheer birthed another year.

The ormolu mirror ringed her guilt

Thank God we are still alive in 2021.

Silently watching, as time and people pass by

the silence we observe beside ashes in the urn

Our conversation becomes a guttering candle;

it flairs... it flames... it fades...Who will blow it out first?

Which of us will find our senses singed?

I took pleasure in our friendship. A cold wind blew it out.

But in my box are cells, fighters who give their lives for a song.
No visitors, no hugs, no friendly face, I feel alone
and isolated in this empty place
Nowhere to hide, it's invisible but there
In the dog's pooled eyes, total allowance
We sidle by like knights in a game of chess
There's no day complete without a cup of tea
Enjoying good health in old age becomes the realisation
that Health is Wealth
We, who have been tested and retested unrelentingly
not for any virus, but by life.

Standing there between the sky and sand
The light touched me, almost glowing, for a moment diaphanous
Deprived of human touch, I shyly hug the Oak
Unruffled, he stepped into the chaos
I'm the last leaf on the branch
and no wind will move me to the ground.
Turgid times awash with distant memories
ebb and flow to a better normal

I'm wearing my face mask of victory with pride

Fragile as a baby bird yellow beak calling.
The Dawn Chorus is louder this year with no car
or truck noise to pollute
its pure twitterings.
There will be many hugs, tears of joy will be seen,
when we raise our middle finger to covid-19

I dance on to find wonder, joy and connection,
I dance on to mourn what is lost, to discover what is found
and I dance on because I can, because I should.
The world is still a beautiful place, and tomorrow
will see a bright dawn
To emerge at last, from safe cocoon, with butterfly wings on a new
dawn

I wish the past will come no more
Heartsick I crave for the silence to end
Success is in the effort. Then conscience is clear
Dark devious cloud of social destruction, your silver lining
has awakened and renewed my soul.
Lockdown means to me not seeing those I care for as often as I
might, not being able to socialise, or go out for a bite;
it's all keep your distance, wash your hands, wear a mask;
after all this time, it's still a daunting task
Wandering in search of Extreme Unction



Lurking on Trolleys

Intrepid intruder, stalker of unwashed hands

Tiny sphere, scourge of a mighty globe

Hermit maker, Pied Piper, separator of families.

Invisible, mean, mocking, taker of independence

Lie on porcelain blue-vein hands.

Siblings left alone to grieve over the phone.

Matron's voice, relentless, "That virus knows no bounds."

Is Earth a 3D asterisk on the Milky Way?

Daily the robin looked me in the eye as if ...

Love is not a memory, but a feeling that resides in your heart and
your soul

Life paused, life interrupted, life changed!

But what will happen when I wake and you will still be gone?

You can row your boat, or let it drift

Tap our feet to the beat of concertina and melodeon

We are prisoners awaiting the unknown – the silent killer grips the
weakest body

Creeping into the nooks & crannies of our lives

Spreading doom and gloom across our land, keeping us safe
but oh so lonely, losing our togetherness, so unfriendly,

I'd rather take a chance or two, have a friendly chat with you!

Creating unsocial distance between muffled mask wearers.

Silent days, lonely walkways, a wave of the hand to try and keep
calm

I don't want to be enslaved to 10,000 steps, or clenching my glutes!
Between past hells and future heavens, this moment poises,
sacrosanct

Lying in wait of national negligence.

The thunderous clap, now paled to a whimper

Will love be stronger for bearing the cost

Calmly, forbearingly, enduringly waiting to spring back in to life

We'll meet at the corner of 'Cornelia Street'

With a tale or two swiftly repeating

As trepidation caresses my mind, I am obliged to let it

Clouds drift by with souls encased within, and blow overhead

like wrinkles across time, etched history in the making

Eyes we can't read, masked faces, missing friends and family so
much.

Time to enjoy nature and recognise the birds

I'm an uncrowned berry on a bush dreaming of moon-some
dancing.

Is it so very wrong to wish I could hug my children and
grandchildren?

Please keep away from my sebaceous, sudoriferous and hormonal
glands

Sameness melding into sameness, blurring the markers of our lives

Health and freedom we sought to win wearing the precious cloak of
discipline

I have not been baking banana bread

Take away coffee, blueberry muffin, consumed on park bench, bliss.

I belong to the era before Google was a verb

This year I've become my older sister's comfort blanket

VI

Dispersing the Knotweed

Intrepid intruder, stalker of unwashed hands

Thief of my sleep, reaper of my dreams, malevolent invader of the world it seems.

Lurking in the unforeseen air ready to pounce unbeknown on these humans.

You silly ass; go — go — Go! Your time is up!

Invisible and noxious, you ambushed many lands.

Vitriolic virus of various mutations,

Silently stealing so many lives

Nurturer of the complacent hordes, a banquet for all doubt.

Friend of close encounter, hugs across the land

Waiting for your touch, to become your friend

Invading my daily silence and isolation with your contagion

Silent killer, creeping into the bodies of the most vulnerable

Goodbye you have outstayed your visit, creating havoc, desperation, sorrow and loneliness. We want our world back please.

It's a clearout. Will you be picked? Do you want to be? So much alone. Which hurts the more, body or soul...

From a waterfall to a pond, life stood still, a new day dawned.

As kids, we hid from the polio jab; now, I hold out my arm dying for it.

He is clever, he is gorgeous, glass always half full, we thank you
Professor Luke O Neill

Masked, sanitised, socially distanced; the needle goes in to this
aging skin!

Skulking, as rogue Perrywort robbing river ripples

Covid came calling, *la belle Dame sans merci*

Chaser of shadowy sounds, distant promises

Waiting in the noise of silence, another word for loneliness

You are not eternal. You will go. And once again our lives will flow.

Culler of the weakened, dispersing like knotweed

Intubated, I feel nothing, I fear a lot

Cocooned, immobilised, world shrinking to coffin size.

"I'm sorry. I'm a bit croakie today, I haven't used my voice
since yesterday. When are you coming down again?"

The bauld Bat-sby clicks and collects...

Waiting for your touch to pretend to be your friend.

A tiny organism controls our planet, what else awaits us in this vast
universe?

And perpetual political pandemic permits this vulture virus vector.

In Lockdown – I open up to your constant and invisible presence
which sets me free

Rubber gloves and face masks strewn on city streets

Ah do you remember Jen? Covid I ever forget?

Lurking on trolleys, feasting on air

Hand reaching for a comforting hand

Sponges of memories endure through a lingering dusk

Deep in the mind consequences roll

As grey skies loom, I feel the gloom, hope for a brighter noon

In the stillness of isolation love rekindles
Alone with my books – delighted
In my foolish impatient youth I thought alas that time so slowly
 passed
Anxious carers and fearful aged bereft of tactile expression
We zoom, we dance, we yearn to connect.
Grandchild, arms outstretched, unheld, bereft.
Emerging from our darkest winter slowly leaving the icy grip of fear

VII

In Praise of Windows

Intrepid intruder, stalker of unwashed hands

Thief, murderer; no goodbyes, only death.

Flirts with vulnerable, dominates and holds command

No Mention No Morals No Mercy

United in isolation the best friends depart

Under the sun's summer gaze bearded heads dip low.

Reaching out and grabbing each new breath of hope

The pale January sun dapples the grey lake water,
welcoming a new season of light and hope

Thoughts are flying through my head, I'm so glad that I'm not dead.

No hugs a real sacrifice.

Life is a series of hellos and goodbyes

Out for a stroll, and two metre rule

I love Spring, I love looking forward

The woodbine wilding weaves in my hair

With a gentle sense of wit that blossoms, rain or shine.

Birds song lifts my spirit as I walk in my garden

Surely Christy Moore will make a song after this
and we'll dance to it.

Sat empty by a window, my white-noise worry lurking silent,
aching deep within and beginning to erode the light

Carers twenty four by seven by 365 don't need a pandemic to have
to 'cocoon'

Monarch of the side eyed judgements of reckless behaviour
New truths, new ways unfold as we befriend and flirt
with this our new uncertainty

No mercy shown to red-eyed faces behind the glass screen

The kiss of life becomes the kiss of death.

Fingers touch the glass defying and delaying the moment of
farewell.

I awaken, breathe and then the loneliness begins again

We must not lose sight of the wind in our sails

He would come through the heather with an easy swing

The longing of wanting to hold you fills my heart in your absence

Sweetheart bakes tarts, songbird lifts hearts, pandemic breaks hearts
as ambulance darts, medics do their parts assisting loved ones
depart

Through a New World, though tempest tossed, guiding a slender
but resilient craft.

No sluggish covid meanderer is he but bumptiously *semper fidelis* to
the course of contractible contagion

Lady Poverty steels the streets, who will call out the emperor is
naked?

A simple man who learned the meaning of etiquette

A hug, a kiss, family, friends - so very missed - but "This will end."

A deadly silent hitch hiker using the human race as its global
transport, leaving death and heartbreaking in its wake.

Soft shoe shuffle at a covid pace

Dare to leave aged behind home-making
Another grey hair shed in the departure lounge
4 I long for new connections in communal places

In spite of it all, you gave me life, I rested my hand on your heart.
Like a sharp-shinned hawk, you swoop on the infirm.
Her unconscious fighting for breath
Wrecking ball nightmare, penning folk in chain gangs
Chairman Mao's revenge on us for rejecting him.

Our co-conspirators have been batted to The Promised Land 🇺🇸
While not personally affected, I feel for all persons afflicted.
Loosen the ties that bind this Cinderella and let her fly.....
Liver spots on sepia skin, crinkle, tissue paper thin
One day, you will be but a distant memory.

You lie in wait ready to ambush me
Little prints bright pink lips loving smear my windolened pane.
Like the Trail of Tears, no border binds the hunger of loneliness.
The eerie quiet of shuttered streets
Through glass windows we kissed goodbye

In your defence, you have created a space for us to stop awhile.
Restless scenes running riot in my head
 and a talent thought dead is forging ahead
You've limited my life , but it is still life
And I am being very well looked after.
I stay inside in praise of windows.

VIII

Not Defined by My Age

Intrepid intruder, stalker of unwashed hands

We turn towards the stormy sea and our Lighthouse blinks
The first daffodil a grand stretch in the evening
The castles, rivers, lakes and landscapes are a treasure to behold.
Shy primroses peeping through ferns and briars
Birds will rise in murmuration, the swarm will rise
 and then descend, twisting and singing at evening time.
Forever happy are my thoughts of many years gone by.

Intrepid intruder, this is my parting glass:

We didn't know how lucky we were; no, we never knew just how
 lucky.
We have slowed down; now we chat together; now, we have time.
It's hard, so hard but we must remember, this too will pass.
The only good side of covid-19 is that our earth has recovered:
 rivers run free abounding with fish.
 Birdsong fills the air
Living differently; outings curtailed, contacts limited, kindness
 enhanced, delighted to meet, outdoors preferred.
 We will eventually get back to some normal!

We are hanging on in there Lord
Gnarled fingers still working
We can't entirely hold down fear.

I'm feeling a wee bit schizophrenica,
from all the fuss about AstraZenica

Intrepid intruder, stalker of unwashed hands,

I am not defined by my age, I am defined
by what I do to heal the planet

I look out to the world of this storm with a cairn's eye

I listen more deeply to the heartbeat of the Earth

We are not broken, just bent out of shape

See — Spring, colour, birdsong. Wash hands

Unbidden, unseen this covid-19 we call the pandemic,
reminding us how fragile life is

Silent, invisible thief of human presence, even of one's very essence!
Seizing soul-mates, banishing companions, destroying
relationships!

It wasn't my time to leave you. God spared me for another day.

The longed-for touch of finger and thumb – a stranger's needed
embrace,

As though it was her first time.

Family. They give you power. You draw energy
to your soul. 'Tis natural

Silencing our cities, ensuring we stay locked in

Freedom takes flight, early language returns

Daffodils blowing with springtime hope

Reminds me of my rearing by watchful and loving parents.

I shall emerge to live the full fragrance of life

Sneaking, snaking suspicion flicks the venom of doubt on elder
dreams

Like a newborn infant, potential unknown

You can do it, life whispered, as he rode his bicycle
that first time without stabilisers.

He was free and I smiled.

Eyes, long clouded by busyness, see treasures in plain sight.

The intruder is stalked by a needle.

Spring brings us shoots of hope.