

NOTES FROM CORONALAND

Missives, Misgivings, and Meandering Thoughts During Lockdown

JO KAPLAN

All poems herein were written between April 1st – April 30th 2020, during California's Safe at Home order. The number sequence corresponds to the date on which each poem was written.



Jo Kaplan writes and teaches in the Los Angeles area with much encouragement from her husband and two cats. Her fiction (sometimes as Joanna Parypinski) has appeared in *Fireside Quarterly*, *Black Static*, *Nightmare Magazine*, and various anthologies. Her forthcoming novel, *It Will Just Be Us*, comes out in September of 2020. She teaches English and creative writing at Glendale Community College, where she also plays cello in the GCC orchestra.

#1 – I AM A BEING THAT CONSUMES

Hungry cats crawl over my body
as I lie in warm comfort.
I get up late. There's no reason to rise
but for breakfast.
(Theirs. Tuna.)
I get up with the promise of coffee,
which I drink until lunch
(Mine. Leftovers.)
and I'm tired again.
In the afternoon it's time to switch
to whiskey
turning lethargy into a species
of euphoric joy
for life, for work, for literature,
for coffee
for cats
for whiskey, thank whiskey, that I can feel so fine
until dismal dusk crawls out
from the edges of sobriety,
and what is joy in a world like this?
I might as well cook dinner
(Ours. Whatever was left at the grocery store.)
before it's too late.
In the quiet dark
I melt into mindless TV
until merciful sleep
creeps in from the edges of my eyes
and pulls me down
with the promise of tomorrow's coffee,
tomorrow's whiskey,
tomorrow's whisper of ephemeral joy.

#2 – THE MASKED ONES

I dreamed of a madman
a positive-test man
cackling and unquarantined
with intent to infect

He came at us hands-first
his whole body a weapon,
attacked with his palms on our faces
touched us with death

We ran from him, screaming,
hiding under desks,

trying to contain
his breath
inside as we threw ourselves at the door

I used to have these dreams
these being-chased dreams
these panicked fight-or-flight dreams
about clowns and masked killers

Not anymore

Now bare flesh is the villain
teeming with unseen disease,
and we the victims
trying to stay alive
are the masked ones

#3 – HOLDING OUR BREATH

the spiders are still spinning
the birds are still singing
the trees are still rustling their leaves in the wind
but the street has gone quiet
the hours more pliant
as we wait for this long pause in living to end

#4 – IN A ZOOM ON THE COMPUTER

The apparition of these faces on the screen;
Spirits in a strange, dark dream.

#5 – SEEDS

I've been sleeping a lot
because thoughts
(big heavy thoughts)
make me tired.

It's when I'm on the brink of epiphany
that my brain decides it has had enough,

like the dandelion scattered in wind
when it feels the first tug of gravity
and drifts inexorably earthward
with a terrible longing to be whole again.

#6 – SOMEDAY? YES.

Did it really come from a bat? Did
it show up unannounced as your ten-day fever last month? Did
we start social distancing soon enough? Did
Carole kill her husband? Did
I brush my teeth this morning?
Did the world forget the grace of a touch?

Is the rain washing contamination from my doorknob? Is
the whiskey washing contamination from my throat? Is
my soul washing contamination from my brain? Is
your heart washing contamination from society? Is
it safe to go outside?
Is it safe to stay here within these walls?

Will we remember how to sing karaoke? Will
we find revelation in clear skies? Will
the coyotes reclaim their urban wilderness? Will
we ever forget crossing the street to avoid each other? Will
someone I know die?
Will I die?

Probably. Maybe. Probably not. Probably. Yes. I hope not.

Maybe? Maybe. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

Yes. Yes. Yes. No. Probably. Someday.

#7 – FLESH WOUNDS

Sometimes deep wounds don't hurt
A chunk of flesh sheared away like so much spat gum
even flesh forgets to bleed, at first
It's numb as television snow
It's wondering,
"How did we get here?"
and the appalling blank in answer,
blink in time.

Maybe it's a tingle, rainpatter on the roof,
like a limb asleep
the pins and needles of forgetting how to feel
Nerves become aloof,
we are protected by the dreamless
and the deep.

As long as we don't wake

we remain
wrapped in a soft gauze cocoon
cradled for healing, but when the healing takes
it betrays the truth unspoken:
that's when it hurts most, this stitching together,
you almost would rather stay broken
and pleasantly numb.

#8 – WHAT

is a lamp without a lightbulb?
A classroom without a teacher?

It is a kind of emptiness
exposing the bare bones
of the structure, revealing
what a thing is without its soul.

#9 – TREMENDOUS

We have it totally under control. It's one person coming in
from China.
We pretty much shut it down coming in
from China.
It's going to be fine.
Stock market starting to look very good to me!
I think that's a problem that's going to go away. They have studied it.
They know very much.
The 15 cases within a couple of days is going to be down close to zero.
We're going very substantially down,
not up.
One day it's like a miracle, it will disappear.
We're ordering a lot of supplies... we're ordering a lot of different elements
of medical.
A lot of things are happening,
a lot of very exciting things are happening
and they're happening very rapidly.
If we have thousands of people that get better just by,
you know,
sitting around and even going to work—
some of them go to work,
but they get better.
I NEVER said people that are feeling sick should go to work.
I think we're doing a really good job in this country at keeping it down...
a tremendous job
at keeping it down.
Anybody right now,

and yesterday,
anybody that needs a test gets a test.
And the tests are beautiful. They are perfect
just like the letter was perfect.
The transcription was perfect.
Right?
This was not as perfect as that
but pretty good.
I like this stuff. I really get it. People are surprised
that I understand it.
Every one of these doctors said,
“How do you know so much about this?”
Maybe I have a natural ability.
Maybe I should have done that instead of running for president.
I don't need to have the numbers double
because of one ship that wasn't our fault.
It will go away. Just stay calm.
It will go away.

#10 – TO THE ESSENTIAL WORKER

who ferries food
like precious jewels, each trip
a high-stakes expedition
to apartments unknown

who rings groceries behind
a glass barrier
windowing the endless stream
of masked faces

who piles bodies
in makeshift morgues
or watches them wheeze
last breaths
in isolation wards

who forsaken struggles
to save these strangers

and who will save
the essential workers?

what do they think
of this existential crisis
from the front lines?

#11 – TODAY A PLANT APPEARED

in my terra cotta pot, the one
gone empty six months ago
left only
with dirt that once cradled
a nascent pepper plant
the squirrels had picked clean
and which had collapsed into a bed
of dead sticks, and one
shameful cigarette butt
like an exclamation point
on failure.

Beside the empty pot, the other—
that monument to giving up,
dead tomato plant
still standing,
its root-rot-black creeping
over crooked twigs still shaggy
with curled up, shrunken leaves
that crumble and scatter
like ash at the merest touch,
still clinging to
four shriveled orange balloons,
what had once been fruit—
left to die.

These two pots—
germinators of dreams
reaching for Eden,
once so full of the moist
soil of promise—have passed the days
unchanged,
forgotten, perhaps ignored

until today.
Today a plant appeared
in that empty pot,
a spiky green desert-dweller
packed in tight
with fresh, soft dirt.
Where did it come from?
Who planted it?
It looks so alive
and generous, that plant,
a gift
perhaps from a stranger,

a neighbor,
someone I have waved to
from six feet away.

#12 – ODE TO ORCHESTRA

My cello silent stays
unplayed-upon for days;
concerts canceled, fingers still
like grace notes lost inside a trill.
I miss symphonic *sturm* and *drang*
of Shostakovich and Schumann;
I miss the strange off-kilter knell
of Mussorgsky and Ravel;
I'd have a pagan little fling
with Stravinsky's Rite of Spring
and then settle the score
with Vivaldi's seasons four.
I miss the fast vibrato
of Allegro Appassionato
and the leaping-fingered feats
of Bach's sweet-sounding suites.

Yes, I could hear them all
in pre-recorded bliss,
but playing in an orchestra
is really what I miss.

#13 – THE HAUNTED HOUSE

Pale figures roam these shadowed halls
And tread these same unvacuumed floors
Again, again – hands dragging at the walls,
Footsteps worrying reopened sores.

Glazed eyes watch through window glass
A world they can no longer feel.
From room to room the specters pass
And go nowhere, a turning wheel.

They are trapped; with furrowed brow
They give suspicious stares to all drawn near.
Their neighbors' houses, too, are haunted now
But no one else can come inside, here.

#14 – A STILL OF SUMMER

There is a certain silence in the sound
Of wind on a ripe blue day.

#15 – THE SCHOOLS ARE EMPTY, THE CHURCHES ARE FULL

The churches fill with those who've come to pray
as if the virus bows before their god,
but Jesus saves to die another day.

Congregations told to stay away
still toward their sacred crucifix they plod,
and churches fill with those who've come to pray.

The pastors mold the worshipers like clay
no masks, no gloves—merely staff and rod,
for Jesus saves! You'll die another day,

or else it's all a hoax, like anchors say
on Fox: it's just in China and abroad,
so fill those churches up! It's time to pray

for health and safety. They will still downplay
the threat until their gathering's outlawed,
but Jesus saves, and we won't die today.

But now, at last, they feel shock and dismay:
the pastor's dead, and nothing but a fraud
who filled the church's coffers. Those who've come to pray
Jesus will not save. They'll die someday.

#16 – POETRY

One must have the temperament for poetry,
a certain love of languorous thought
and pretty things—but also,
a compulsion to press tender bruises
and wonder at the meaning
of an empty plastic bag floating
like a ghost
down the sidewalk;
one who is not tempted
by the easy current of the lazy river,
but who, with all conviction,
swims the riptide just to see
what treasures it dredges up.

#17 – ROTTEN FRUIT

Lemons are falling from neighbors' trees—
falling and rotting
while bees visit this citrine graveyard
searching for something sweet.
Are there lemons at the grocery store?
Which shelves are still empty?
Who knows, anymore.
I found a moldy lemon
in my HelloFresh delivery,
gray as an aged alien.
How long
since it parted from tree,
from earth?
Imagine a citrus-giving Robin Hood
picking fruit off these bloated limbs
and leaving bright bundles
on apartment doorsteps
as if to say,
“Please don't get scurvy.
They would have gone bad
anyway.”

#18 – HOW TO FALL ASLEEP BEFORE MIDNIGHT WHEN THE WORLD IS ON FIRE

One part vodka.
One part coffee liqueur.
One part milk.
An ice cube. Maybe two.
Stir. Or don't. Who cares?

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

#19 – SPRING CLEANING

Is the air toxic?
Black grime on the windowsills
caked-in, like a distillation
of car exhaust
exhaled, sprinkling down
as snow to gather, scatter, fall.
This is spring-cleaning,
quarantine-cleaning,
quaranteaning,

to clear away this filth
we leave, wherever humans live.
Old paint peels
at the corners of crown molding
holding the windows in
with their accumulation of dust,
and rust reddens the shower door.
Scrubbing 'til we're sore,
we know we'll have this one brief
pristine moment
before the dirt blows in again,
drifts up like anthills,
and re-darkens our windowsills.

#20 – BRAIN BLEED

I feel like I have to have it all figured out by now.
I don't know why. At first—
when conquering Zoom, digitizing the classroom—
being scrambled as an egg
seemed... okay.
Expected. Understandable.
So why does it feel, now weeks have passed,
and new routines have become routine,
that I need to have my shit together?
I don't

know what has changed,
only that nothing has changed,
unchanging days bleeding
in unchangeable rooms.
I'm not doing enough. I can't
do any more. I keep
hemorrhaging motivation.
My body melts into my bed
to sleep, and sleep, and sleep.

#21 – NO WORDS TODAY

sometimes there is more in blank

space
than in words

#22 – EARTH DAY

pollution in Los Angeles is down
thirty percent.
air fills with the scent
of jasmine and pine, and skies
ring with blue clarity.
on distant beaches, baby turtles
trace their winding way to the sea
in wet sand. you can see
the mountains' marbled ridges,
hear how varied the chirrups of birds.

Listen.

coyotes are window-shopping on Michigan Avenue
while Jalandhar wakes to a startling view
of snowcapped Himalayan peaks
miles away. while we've been inside for weeks,
monkeys learned to navigate New Delhi
and a pack of jackals
gathered in a park in Tel Aviv.
a kangaroo hops through Adelaide.

Look

what a mess we have made.
the stars are coming out again
but they are where they've always been
behind the veil of waste we gave
to the planet that birthed us
we refuse to save
like petulant teenagers
who leave dirty socks on the floor.
man huddles in fear of man
but the earth is content.

Breathe deeply, if you can.

#23 – SCREEN FATIGUE

The three dimensions of your face
have flattened
to a low-res blur of pixels

I observe myself
and I observe myself being observed

remember when we lost ourselves
in dive bars singing
bad karaoke
present in our bodies
unaware
of what our own faces looked like?

Now we are all Narcissus
living in a flatland of mirrors
everywhere reflecting
ourselves back onto ourselves

so we talk to our own faces
and pretend the muted screens can hear

we are ourselves and each other
watching ourselves
perhaps being watched
in this panopticon of our own devices

#24 – WENDY'S ASH

In *The Shining*
a story of
(isolation)
a writer losing his mind
in a haunted hotel

his son creates
an imaginary friend
(himself)
to cope with ghosts
blood
and redrum

his wife smokes
desperate cigarettes
not because of
ghosts or madness
(come here)
she grows her tower of ash
balanced precarious
as her crumbling family
(take your medicine)
held in place
by nothing but will
one little flick

would send it scattering
but she holds it steady
(come here and take your medicine)
to stop her family from falling

a
p
a
r
t

#25 – AN APRIL HEAT WAVE INSIDE LATEX GLOVES & CLOTH MASKS

The sun beats my back
as I pack groceries
into the trunk of my car

wondering when this April heat
will magically make you disappear.

#26 – A CAT PERCHES LOOKING OUT OF A WINDOW

My cat's whole world resides within these walls;
she sits looking out the window, and calls
to the birds—that chattering sound
of excitement, or conquest, to have found
some manner of prey. But her prey is outdoors,
and though she would land on all fours
she cannot leap through glass.

She can watch all the world beyond pass:
car beams rolling out in the night,
hungry squirrels, a flock of birds taking flight;
she watches them like we watch TV
convincing ourselves what we see
has any relation at all to where we are,
and isn't, in truth, so very far.

#27 – THINGS ARE GETTING WEIRD

Did you hear
about the UFOs?
No one knows
what they could be,
not even the Navy.

#28 – WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE ZOMBIES

or a nuclear holocaust
that ravaged the world

doomsday preppers gathered guns
for hordes of hungry flesh-eaters
as if a well-aimed bullet
would make heroes of paranoid men

as if these deadly toys
mean anything
to a virus that propagates

faster than conspiracy theories
that infects before you know it's there
too small to be shot

now instead of guns-blazing
we are Netflix-binging
pajama-uniformed

the introverts will save the world

I bet those gun-nut preppers
are disappointed
there is no one to shoot in the face

I bet this isn't the apocalypse they wanted

#29 – A GLIMPSE OF OUR LEAVING

If humans left the world
blue jays would nest inside
the corroded hollows of abandoned
skyscrapers. Trees would creep
across forgotten freeways
growing homes for bonobos.
The Mall of America
would be as inscrutable
as Stonehenge, its purpose
enigmatic to those future visitors
to earth whose language
bears no word for consumerism.
Our stucco apartments
would become as ancient
as the pyramids at Giza.

The earth would heal
itself of all our choking smog
and cough it all away just like
a cold. There would be
peace in the empty sky.
There would be music
in the calls of birds.
There would be conflict
in survival on the savannah.
But there would be no
literature, no art, no laughter,
no flattered smiles over the lid
of a coffee cup, no electric tingle
of a lover's hand
as it grazes the back of a neck,
no violins soaring in exquisite
melancholy, no over-shoulder
glance of regret, no
awe at photographs of a black
hole, no philosophical
debates over whether we have a soul,
no poetry, no stories told
over a fire,
no desperate curiosity,
no fervent desire.

#30 – SUFFOCATION

There is an empty hole where my mind
refuses to wonder
what it's like. The crush of
collapsing lungs
like eggshell shoes
on concrete legs.
Trying to draw breath
like sucking molasses
through a straw.
The slippage of vital
sand through a crack
in the hourglass.
Carrying a bowling ball
in your ribcage
with no pins in sight.
But it's not that.
I don't know what it really is
so I make metaphors
to fill that blank space

with something
other than the void.