

Dis-Ease: Poetry in the Period of the Pandemic

(a narrative in 8 lyric pieces of the struggle to turn distress into eustress)

Dis-Ease*

(this signal piece was accepted on 27 May 2020, for publication in the Asian Studies Journal, UP Asian Studies Center)

1 Unmasked,
2 he smiles,
3 gestures with an arm
4 across a demesne palpable as imagined:
5 “This is the world I’ve always wanted.”

6 The old, with a stunned gasp,
7 collapsing suddenly at his feet;
8 the new disease, swooping in softly,
9 downed in the cloak of ease,
10 the way lines fall readily into place
11 in the stolid march
12 between life and death,
13 perfectly cadenced
14 6 feet apart,
15 6 rationed sardine cans at each doorstep,
16 6 feet in the ground no longer,
17 but the shortest distance
18 between confinement and
19 that final flaming consignment.

20 Around his table, men in masks
21 that sheathe the black, hooked beaks of quacks,
22 grin and nod and softly cluck,
23 “This is the world we’ve always wanted.”
24 Corrigible.
25 Obsequious.
26 Vulnerable.
27 Intimidated.
28 Dominated.

29 We are taught to parrot, to twitter the words
30 ‘round in our little cages:
31 “This is the world we’ve always wanted...”
32 with nary a hint of a whimper,
33 else to end
34 despite pleading arms
35 long outstretched in dazed surrender,

36 nailed,
37 point-blank to the chest,
38 with a bang.

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*Notes:

- The line numbers are part of the poem and please retain as is.
- This poem speaks of the new normal under ECQ conditions, including, among other things, the 21 April 2020 Barangay Pasong Putik QC homicide by a police personnel of a discharged soldier, Cpl Winston Ragos who, according to his identification and witness testimonials of relatives and community members, was suffering from PTSD from a Marawi assignment.

Grieving in Quarters*

elephants do not forget.
they remember
while slowly swaying
to an imperceptible dirge.

the tips of their trunks
like trembling, tentative fingers
caress the bones
of their long dead loves.

in a soft, low rumble
they hum an old lullaby
as tears course down
the ragged runnels of their cheeks.

i am an elephant:
my grief is long.

and just like slow moving bulk,
long the circuitous journey
to get back to where memories
sleep undisturbed, nestled in wild grass.

but while the herd, after some brooding
eventually moves on,
to return to these graveyards
sometime not very soon,

in the savannah dusk
i stand unmoving,
where I am rooted,
yet still moved, still swaying.

*This is a socially-grounded commentary on empathy with fellow creatures, the elephants that appeared much abused, killed or dead during the COVID outbreak. In India, one very young (three-year old) pregnant elephant was victimized by a village that planted firecrackers in a pineapple she ate, rendering her injured and with her baby in the belly, dying a slow, painful death through starvation and wounds as a result of her injuries, as well as the discovery of many newly dead elephants in Zimbabwe. The grief of the author over the death of such gentle animals may be no different than the human grief we feel at the numerous deaths of loved ones and fellow humans in the time of COVID, just as the veterinarian who eventually saw to the dead elephant wept when it was found out she was so young and pregnant at that. It also makes a statement about how grief is felt as deeply by creatures as by

humans, and how in the human suffering during the pandemic, the fragile web of life also shows reverberating impacts on other forms of life, connected as we all are.

In Quarantine*

Why we end up
where we end up
is tautology:
the circumlocution
of fate.

Why we end up
with whom we end up
is the solipsism
of fate;
not the well-wrought
torque of a trope
but a slip of the tongue,
parole.

Where we end up
with whom we end up
is retort circumstantial:
fate's below the staircase argument.

*This piece contemplates the cabin fever felt at being locked in, locked down with whomever it is one happened to be isolated with, together yet separate. It makes us rethink how social distancing affects our lives, and makes us also examine how distant exactly, or how near the distance to socially tear us apart is. This is also hinting at the travails undertaken by people who found themselves in quarantine and in direr straits, say, by those suffering from all forms of abuse when kept in close quarters with their very abusers.

Love in the Time of COVID*

nostalgia paints in dreamy lines,
in the movement of dance,
in the poesy of words,
incompleteness.

loss triggers love:
a leap without a landing,
motion breathtaking in the suspended arc;
in parlay with unfinished meanings,
thoughts beautiful in the hesitations between.

tension takes the place of closure.
the one that got away
is suddenly the best,
the only one you could ever have had.

*This piece problematizes relationships found, lost and deemed irreparable in a time of isolation enforced by the lockdowns due to the COVID outbreak. It makes us wonder if love and relations as we know these will ever be the same during and after COVID.

Still Life

(The Wait of an LSI*)

nothing moves:
beneath my rasping breath,
not the down on the forearm,
each strand turned copper
in the glare.

at the silent center of noon
the white orb blazes,
fire trees have burst all aflame—
but nothing moves
before the tirade of heat:

not a leaf
against the whorl
of clouds.
not a tendril poised
against the curve of sky,

not i.

*LSI: in Philippine pandemic parlance, a Locally Stranded Individual

This puts in almost slow or stop-motion the sense of time and waiting experienced by locally stranded individuals in the Philippines, who are forced to wait and at the moment live like a homeless street dweller, for what seems to be an interminable time to be allowed to get the permit and the means to get back home.

Writing from the Strand*

i
my heart was a shell that broke.
now like a ghost dreadnaught
afloat in fog at dusk,
i creep upon the strand,
searching in the backwash
for chamber.

ii
i have wept
enough to cover you in nacre
yet you refuse to come 'round
as to a mother's tender shaping.
unmindful of this churning,
the whorl of tides,
still i try to harbor you
in the soft cradle
of enclosing arms,
of bosom, of womb.

i was your oyster
i was your world.

you are the prized pearl
i would nestle
in this safe bed
if only you would be
still
so circumscribed.

iii
one day i will just pull together
the halves of this chipped
barnacle-encrusted carapace,
enfold myself as in wings,
be circled
by a secret rainbow's embrace.

i shall be safe.
unmoved
by the buffeting of brine,

the tug of the undertow.

*This piece expresses both hope and fear, pessimism and optimism for a better post-COVID period, while resorting to introspection and isolation enforced by quarantine.

Covid-19*

(A conundrum in three tiers)

dybbuk

alternative spelling

dibbuk

both pronounced

/di'bu:k/

from Hebrew

dābaq

meaning

to “adhere” or “cling”

“*ru'ah tezazit*”

unclean spirit

from the outside.

in Jewish lore,

a malicious, lost soul,

the already dead

fated to accomplish

a vengeful goal;

a possessing parasite

to be exorcised.

for the malevolent

what is, is not so,

unless end to end

from fall to salvation

the lesson reversed;

evil when made evident,

tip of tail to point of horn:

kubbid

then, take 19

in two moves flip,

from top to bottom,

as was above, now below;
then right to left--
or left to right,
it matters not anyhow--
61, added per tradition
yields 7 but not of heaven.
in the Kabbalah's way,
vav or *wav* actually is 1
the gematria equalling 6,
arrived at in moves of 3.
(*vav/wav* means alternatively
"and, web, connect,")

co-vid,
when *vid*, variant of Latin *vis*,
means "to see"
and *co* is "together or same,"
can you re-envision as do I,
see the same, see as same;
count you also lines of this game
that connect fear to the name?

*This poem puzzles out the connection between COVID and the biblical sense of evil identified, in the book of Revelations, through wordplay and numerology based on the Hebrew Kabbalah.

Lockdown*

a banshee is screaming
an alarm in my ear
tonight---
my head is on fire.

i hear the muffled shrieks
of the locked up
clawing with brittle nails
at the metal window restraints:
LET US OUT! LETUSSOUTT!!
their sibilants meld with the hiss,
the spitting of flames
of silenced tongues.

the long-forgotten others
moan in the bone-white haze.
they clutch weighted plastic bags
translucent as intent, close,
like amulets, to their chests.
the veins in their hands bulge blue,
strained from lugging along
the baggage they wouldn't let go of
since they first brought this within:
inoculating relief out of relief received
nobbled by noxious fear of no seconds coming.

the "all clear!" call
will not be soon a siren sounded this time.
the police at the barricades
are not budging
at all.

shielded from beneath
the concave,
the cool bubble of dark sky,
a tattered, aptly-distanced crowd lurks,
sniffing through flimsy masks,
the scent of spoils lost on them.
the lined-up ambulances also wait.
later, it will be easier to respond to
the *quo vadis* of COVID's bereaved:

ashes to ashes, boxes to bags—
than to stand valiantly by the blaze now.

back in base camp, wearied frontliners
attempt to surmount the unending sorting:
the unscathed, the critical,
the escaped,
the dead.

*This piece expresses the feeling of confinement, both internal and external, mental, emotional and physical while in lockdown due to COVID, as the persona contemplates the things going on outside: distancing, massive cremations, overworked frontliners tending to the sick and fallen.