



COVIDITY

A collection of writing inspired by the pandemic

Edited by JL Merrow,
Phil Mitchell and
Wendy Turner



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About Covidity

Covidity is a collection of writing by members of Verulam Writers, inspired by the pandemic of 2020/21. Both poetry and prose are yours to discover, from factual and funny to fantastic and the downright fiendish.

If, under lockdown, you've become an armchair traveller, you'll find *Covidity* is the perfect vehicle. Look no further if you wish to travel the world in just one bite, indulge in a little daydreaming on the bus or pop up to Barnard's Castle for an eye-check.

The more adventurous could try bear hunting in the garden shed, don your hiking boots to tackle Lockdown Hills or, for the brave, see if your glad-rags still fit and go dancing. Tempted to get a pet—or fake one? We have cautionary tales for dog and cat lovers alike. A spot of turkey transformation will have you mesmerised as might Magda's skulduggery as she secures a fortune—not to mention Wilf's dastardly plans.

Still bored with lockdown? Let us cheer you up with some Positives from the Pandemic or twelve rounds of the virus versus the vaccine. If it comes to it, you can always build a sausage roll skyscraper...

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Introduction - Strange times

At the time of writing, it's been a strange year and a bit. We've all felt the impact of the pandemic, and we've all experienced it in different ways. When we had to cancel our Verulam Writers meetings, it was a loss felt by every member. It took us some time to adapt to the change of circumstances, but we emerged, tentatively, holding our meetings online using Zoom. We had little idea how well it'd go, fearing we might lose our collective and encouraging spirit, but I'm pleased to say we're thriving. Our members continue to create and share amazing work. As well as having a good chat, we're there to support each other, to help each other better our writing, and share our ideas, knowledge and experience. Although so many things have been lost during this pandemic, our group feels stronger than ever.

When our long-time member, Wendy Turner, suggested we produce an anthology of work inspired by the Covid 19 pandemic, I loved the idea. The pieces in *Covidity* (the name mirrors that of our quarterly newsletter, *Veracity*) are artifacts, time-capsules, and snapshots. We're now able to look back at how writers responded creatively to these strange times, using their fiction, poetry, plays, and essays to capture a wide spectrum of the human experience. The writing in *Covidity* shows the immeasurable capability of our members, and as such, I'm extremely proud of this anthology, and I hope you enjoy it as much as I do.

Phil Mitchell

Chair of Verulam Writers

March 2021

In memory of Richard Bruckdorfer—a talented and valued member of Verulam Writers.

Masks by Ben Bergonzi

It's a great thing, this virus. It's clearing out the dead wood, freeing up inheritances and levelling up society. So that people like me can—maybe—get level with people like you.

You. I don't really know you. I just know where you work and what chances you've had. You're my age but with a better education. You always come past my garage the same time every evening, riding your expensive bike in your lycra leggings, a stupid cycling mask on your face even though it's all fields round here.

So now the time has come. This is the night we're going to level up. I rev the engine on my crappy old Fiesta and let in the clutch, so the car lurches out of the driveway and into the main road. And slams into you. A glancing blow, perfectly judged. You're off your bike and sliding along the tarmac. I've lost a headlight bulb but I don't care.

I jump out and run over to you. "Oh shit, I'm sorry." You're lying face down, but you're moving your arms and legs, checking yourself out. "Are you all right?"

"Nothing broken, I think," you say, "but"—you shake your head muzzily—"you should have bloody looked." There's blood on your chin and your cheek as you push yourself up. You kneel up.

"My fault. Totally. Sorry. Let me help you."

"Just hold the bike, will you?" I take the handlebars. You gingerly pull yourself upright. There's a bit of blood on one of your hands, and on your chin and your nose.

"Your bike looks OK," I say brightly, though I hope I'm wrong.

"No, it's not," you say. "Look at the front forks." I see that the forks are bent back so that the wheel is rubbing on the diagonal of the frame. "Can't ride that anywhere."

"You'll have to tell me whatever I owe you."

"If I can even find a bloody bike shop that can fix it."

"You'd better rest," I say. "Come and sit then I'll give you a lift to wherever you're going."

You look doubtfully at me, then wince as you turn your head, and put up a hand to rub the back of your neck. "I shouldn't go in the house or the car."

"Come in the garage. Look, let's get everything off the road." I take your bike over and prop it against the fence. "Just wait there." You come over and put a hand on the saddle, then lean against the fence just inside the narrow driveway that leads down to my detached garage which stands at the bottom of my long garden. No-one can hear us.

Once the car's off the road, I push the door up, then stand back. "Plenty of room," I say encouragingly. "We can keep social distancing." Inside the garage there's an old wicker

settee with a blanket over it. “Come in and sit down for a few minutes.” You still hesitate. “No-one’s been here for a long time.”

You slowly come past me into the garage, then sit down heavily on the settee. “Let’s keep that bike safe,” I say, and fetch it in off the driveway. Then I close the door and come and stand in front of you. “You take your time and rest.”

You take the bike helmet off your head and put it on your lap. There’s a deep scratch across its plastic surface. You’re wincing as you move your head.

“I’ve got some plasters here,” I say, moving behind you.

“I’ll have to put them on myself,” you say.

“Rest for a minute.”

I pick up an iron crowbar with a hook. It’s hanging against the brickwork and I’m careful to grasp it very cleanly so as not to make any noise. I lift it up, swing it, and down it comes on the back of your head. And you fall down, swift and silent. I catch you as you fall, and lay you down gently on the settee. As you lie, the basket work creaks under your weight. I bend and listen to your breath. Yes, you’re really out cold, sleeping peacefully. I feel your head. There’s no blood, just a nice warm bruise. But you’ll probably only be unconscious for a quarter of an hour. I fetch the chain over, the one that’s secured to the iron downpipe in the corner, and lock the cuff to your ankle. Then I go through your pockets—your wallet, your phone, your staff pass. It’s all there. Finally, because I’m not cruel, I get the bucket and the bottle of water and the bread and tinned beans and sausage, and leave them all ready for you.

Goodnight, goodnight. Thanks for your help with my training. I might have one or two questions for you over the next few days.

I leave the garage by the side door. The sun’s low, shadows are lengthening, as I make my way down the garden to my house. Thank God it’s all mine now. All silent. There’s no more moans and curses from Dad, fretting in his Alzheimer confusion. Thank you, Covid. Of course when he finally went, it was too late for me to pick up the scraps of my wrecked education. Too much time lost. But still. Other opportunities are arising.

The next morning I’m there at your workplace bright and early. I’m coming into the building on the opposite side to where you would have arrived, a different department—they’ll not be expecting you today as you phoned in sick (or I did for you.) I straighten my mask and stride right up to the receptionist, then show her the email I’ve just forged.

“Morning. I’m booked in for my Emergency Medicine rotation. Dr Earnshaw.”

She barely looks at the letter or the badge round my neck. “Right. Go straight through, doctor. See Dr Gupta. She’ll give you the orientation.”

Gupta's a short lady, her eyes hardly visible over her mask and through her plastic visor. "Now I would show you all the ropes," she says in old fashioned Indian English, "but it'll have to wait. There's been a big RTA on the A1. We've got the air ambulance inbound."

"Just as well I'm here then," I say, "I'll get scrubbed up."

Twenty minutes later I am elbow deep in a mangled mess of bone and blood. It had been the chest of a forty year old man whose car had been struck head on by a TIR truck. Somehow his heart is still flickering weakly. In the middle of the mess I see a piece of oily metal, some remnant of the impact. Perhaps a piece of the steering column? There's a theatre nurse with me and the anaesthetist over in the corner with her tubes and cylinders. No sign of Gupta—she has an even worse casualty. I'm on my own. I put a hand on the lump of metal.

"Doctor, are you sure?" says the nurse.

"Look here, nurse, I know what I'm doing." I pull the metal out, and sure enough there is a jet of blood squirting over my hand. "Clamp," I bark.

The nurse passes me a number six plain clamp.

I take it and put it on the artery, but I say, "Haven't you got any spring clamps? Serrefine?"

"Yes, we've got a Dieffenbach. Here."

"That's more like it." I take the familiar tool in my hand, and flick it open and shut the way I used to do when I was selling them. Then I put it down into the bloody cavity and close it over the spurt of red. And now we wait and watch. Either the clamp will work and I've saved him, or the flow will go on, he'll die, and I've helped him on his way. Either way, I'm in charge. I wonder how you're getting on in the garage? Sooner or later, I'm going to have to let you go. I think we both know that.

But these masks aren't going away any time soon.

After a minute, the spurt of blood under the clamp reduces to a slow ooze. I look across at the nurse and there's a moment of grudging respect in her eyes.

I tell her, "You do get what you pay for, you know."

Coronavirus: The Positives by Tina Shaw

Like most of us, I have been missing quite a few people and events during the last few weeks, but I thought it might be refreshing to dwell on the positives, even though some of these have also had negative side effects.

On a personal level, I can include:

- Speaking to my neighbour who I have been avoiding for various reasons for over a year and actually getting a response.
- Increasing my technical knowhow by using Facebook, Zoom and Teams and not using a cheque to pay my milk bill.
- Reading a different genre of books to my usual selection of modern novels. (*The Da Vinci Code* isn't as awful as everyone said it was!)
- Spending less on petrol, sport, holidays and haircuts.

On a national level, there have been numerous benefits:

- Less traffic, less pollution and minimal aircraft noise.
- More cycling, more walking and greater appreciation of nature. Birds and animals have been able to flourish as a result.
- More local shopping and less buying of “stuff” for its own sake. More DIY, crafts, gardening and “make do and mend.”
- Greater appreciation of the low paid, key workers, NHS and the BBC.
- A rise in local help groups and a fall in knife crime and crime in general.
- Rough sleepers being housed in hotels.

And finally, from a synagogue perspective:

- A rise in service attendance, including greater accessibility for those who find it hard to travel to shul, and an increased awareness of the need to keep in touch with our more vulnerable members.
- The Biennial, usually the province of the few, tuned into by over 1500 people.

On Track - One-act play by Benita Cullingford

Synopsis:

Sarah and Alan Bartlett are isolated during lockdown in their high-rise apartment. Sarah wants a car. She has strong reasons. Alan opposes. Due to a serious accident, Alan, a formula racing car driver, no longer drives. Sarah has supported Alan long enough and there are ways and means.

Characters:

ALAN (middle-aged) Former professional racing car driver. Walks with limp.

SARAH (middle-aged) Alan's wife, school administrator.

Set: a high-rise apartment on the eighth floor. Exit to landing. Exit to bedroom. Small balcony (front of stage).

Furnished apartment: sofa, armchair, table and chairs. Free-standing fridge. Bookcase with books. Large trophy (cup) on top of bookcase. Framed photos on wall showing racing cars. Large, framed photo of ALAN in white racing car overalls, standing on rostrum holding up trophy cup.

Time: April 2020, during Coronavirus lockdown.

SCENE 1

When curtain opens, ALAN stands looking at his framed photo. He turns to trophy, takes a handkerchief from his pocket and dusts trophy.

Alan sighs. He goes to fridge. Opens door. Slams door shut in disgust (no beer).

Door to landing opens. SARAH enters (backwards). She is weighed down by two bulging bags. SARAH dumps bag containing carton of beer cans on floor and bag of groceries on table. She looks puffed.

SARAH exits to kitchen.

ALAN grabs a beer can from bag, pulls off lid, and drinks.

SARAH returns drying her hands on a towel. She sits at table.

SARAH Alan, I want to buy a car.

ALAN (Splutters into beer can, shocked) Okay, Okay! I'll get my own beer cans!

SARAH This is for me! I want a car. We've enough money in the savings bank now, with that lottery postcode win.

ALAN And we agreed, didn't we, after my accident, not to have a car. Being in a high-rise apartment and close to shops and your school, we don't need one.

SARAH (Unloading groceries from bag) That was five years ago, Alan! If I'd known it would take you that long to get over your driving phobia, I'd never have agreed. Now, I'm the one doing all the shopping and helping neighbours, and I need a car.

ALAN Helping neighbours?

SARAH Yes, like, Major Sharma. He's a dear.

SARAH goes outside to small balcony (front of stage).

ALAN follows her. They have to stand close.

SARAH (Points down) Flat 6, two floors below us.

ALAN Oh, that old boy. The one trying to grow oranges in his window box.

SARAH (Exasperated) They're ornamental. He likes me to buy him the real thing, if I can get them.

ALAN Since when?

SARAH Since lockdown.

ALAN How does that work, then?

SARAH I knock, and he pushes a note under his door.

ALAN gives her a look.

ALAN Let's get this straight. You want to buy a car, to get the old boy down below, oranges?

SARAH And groceries. And he's not the only one. I get shopping for Maggie Green, you know, she's got five kids and her pastry-cook husband is still stuck on that cruise ship.

SARAH follows ALAN back into room

SARAH Major Sharma is far worse off than you, Alan. His wife died last year, and he's only got one leg. You've only lost three toes!

ALAN Thanks to your so-called mechanic of a cousin!

SARAH Alan, you can't go on blaming Jameson. He wasn't your only mechanic. You made a mistake. You were driving too fast!

ALAN I'm a Formula racing driver, for God's sake!

SARAH (Shouts) Were! Now you can't even get in a car.

They glare at each other.

ALAN You are aware, Sarah, aren't you, of the number of car accidents there are every week on our roads!

SARAH shrugs

SARAH I am aware that you study the statistics and know how many there are. Or think you do. You're so gullible, Alan. You believe everything you read online is true. You're getting paranoid. Study something else.

ALAN (Puppy dog look) I'd still worry about you, Hun.

SARAH Oh, no. You're not getting around me with that puppy dog look. I've been sympathetic long enough. I'm buying a car, and that's that!

ALAN Not with our money you're not. The account's in my name.

ALAN plonks himself down at the far side of the table and opens his laptop.

SARAH sucks in her breath. She slams her open palms down on the table and shouts.

SARAH Other people, Alan; people with gumption, people with a backbone, pick themselves up and get on with life. Jockeys who fall off horses; they get back on and race. Not that I'm suggesting you should attempt Formula 2 again...

ALAN I've been writing a sci-fi book!

SARAH Yes, but now you've finished it.

ALAN disregards her and concentrates on his screen.

SARAH A schoolfriend of mine, a professional dancer, broke her foot. She couldn't dance on pointe again, so she started up her own ballet school. You could do that. You could help out at Silverstone, take an interest in up-and-coming youngsters.

Silence

ALAN Nice try, Sarah. No car.

SARAH I usually get what I want, Alan.

SARAH moves to Alan. She attempts a new approach, seduction. She runs her hands caressingly through his hair.

SARAH I could cut it for you. Make you all pretty again.

ALAN (shrugs her off) No thanks.

SARAH moves away. She looks thoughtful, she's not given up yet. Turns back to Alan.

SARAH Obviously, getting groceries isn't my only reason for wanting a car.

ALAN looks up from his screen.

SARAH I want to visit Liz. Emily's three weeks old and I've never even seen her! She's our first grandchild.

ALAN What about those photos Liz sends on her phone.

SARAH (Almost in tears) It's not the same as holding her, giving her a cuddle. At the rate this virus is going, she could be walking to nursery school before I've even given her a kiss!

ALAN Public transport?

SARAH It takes three trains to get to Devon from here, you know that!

ALAN concentrates on his screen again.

SARAH I've taken my driving test.

ALAN And failed, twice.

SARAH Took more lessons with Jameson and passed.

ALAN When?

SARAH Before lockdown, when you were all tied up with your novel writing. And I've just received my driving licence. Want to see it?

ALAN I'm still saying no.

SARAH folds her arms and looks daggers.

ALAN gets up. He goes to her and puts an arm around her shoulders.

ALAN Look Honey, be reasonable. With things the way they are it would be madness to try and buy a car now. No-one is selling and garages are shut.

ALAN tries to turn her for a passionate kiss.

SARAH pulls away.

SARAH No, Alan!... I don't need to go to a garage. I've had an offer of a car already.

ALAN (getting angry) Well you've got your guns all lined up, haven't you? Go on then, blast me with it!

SARAH Jameson's offered me a lovely Ford Fiesta automatic.

ALAN has heard enough. He groans, throws his hands up and moves to exit Left.

SARAH (shouts after him) It's one from his showroom and I could have it anytime!

ALAN reappears Left.

ALAN Over my dead body!

Blackout. Scene ends.

SCENE 2

Same set. Later. The table has been cleared, and bag of beer cans removed.

SARAH sits on sofa. She is talking to her daughter Liz on her smart phone.

SARAH (chuckles) I might have to kill him first! ... I know he's being unreasonable, nothing new about that, but it doesn't help ... Sweet of you to offer, Liz, but I know your father, God knows we've been married long enough. When his mind is made up (puffs out cheeks) that's it... True, true, yes I did go along with it, and yes I've been very supportive, but enough is enough, Liz. I can be equally stubborn.

SARAH gets up and starts pacing.

SARAH (Listening to Liz on phone) NO prob. Got it sorted... Cousin Jameson offered me one of his... (nods) You're probably right. Alan's always resented his success... What! Jealous of me being able to drive and he can't? It's a Ford automatic, Alan could manage that... Well, yes, he did love his gears. (sighs) He was the driver, and I was the driven. Now, change of subject. How's my baby granddaughter?

SARAH steps out onto balcony.

SARAH (Listening, wipes away a tear)... Give her a kiss from grandma. Sarah, I'm out on the balcony. It's such a clear day, I can see over the hills and I'm thinking about you all. When this is over, I'm driving down to see you. We might even come down together... I know, I know he won't. But I'm still determined, and there are ways and means. Something will come up, you'll see. ...What's that, dear?... Oh, Jake's online banking problem. Well, it took a while, but I'm glad it helped. Tell him, any time... I know, I'm the I.T. whizz. (laughs) But your father is the one glued to the computer. Bye Love. Kiss, kiss.

SARAH switches off phone. She looks down over balcony rail, and waves.

SARAH (Shouts down) Wait until I get a car.

ALAN enters. He sits at table and opens his laptop.

SARAH leaves balcony and goes to him. She peers at his screen.

SARAH What's so engrossing? Researching for another sci-fi book?

ALAN No, as it happens. Taking your advice, I've embarked on something new.

SARAH Oh, Alan, that's great. What is it?

ALAN Can't say too much. Still early days.

SARAH One clue?

ALAN What's it worth?

SARAH No more nagging.

ALAN It's to do with finance. With making our money work for us, Sarah. I've come across this great company called Ingots.

SARAH moves away, frowning.

ALAN Now what?

SARAH Don't like the sound of that.

ALAN You're not going to have another go at me, are you?

SARAH Sorry, but yes. You can't trust those web sites. Most of them are con artists, only after your money. They set traps for naive investors who get caught up in their webs of deceit. (getting carried away). They creep up on the unwary with offers of temptation – a good deal here, an unmissable offer of a lifetime bond, there. Until you're drawn into their clutches, and dazzled. Then they pounce, scuttle away with your riches leaving you drowning in debt.

SARAH plonks herself down on the sofa and folds her arms.

ALAN Feeling better?

SARAH shrugs.

ALAN Could have done without the lecture.

SARAH I'm in school management. We have to know about things like that for the students. Particularly school leavers.

ALAN They're savvier than you lot!

SARAH That's why we've got to keep up.

ALAN concentrates on his screen again.

SARAH fetches her smart phone and returns to the sofa.

SARAH What's the name of that company again?

ALAN Ingots.

SARAH (laughing) They'll see you coming. In-you-go, I-got-ya!

ALAN Shut up!

SARAH Sorry.

Both concentrate in silence for a while.

SARAH How are you getting on?

ALAN Good, good. Just met this guy called Wilf.

SARAH smothers a laugh.

ALAN Seems nice. And genuine, in case you're wondering. Look, come and read this.

SARAH (Shouts back at him) You know my feelings on the subject.

Blackout. Scene ends

SCENE 3

Same set. Night.

ALAN sits at table peering at his laptop screen. He wears pyjamas and dressing gown. Light shines onto his keyboard from a table lamp.

ALAN suddenly sits back, fists in the air, elated. Then

OMG! He peers forward at screen again. Rakes his hair with his hands. Something awful has happened!

ALAN gets up, hands to his mouth, despairing. He sits again, peers at screen. No, it's true. He slams laptop lid shut, pushes it away and bangs his forehead several times on the tabletop.

Lights out. Scene ends.

SCENE 4

Same set. Next morning.

ALAN is still in his dressing gown. He is asleep at the table. His head on folded arm.

SARAH enters from kitchen with a mug of coffee. She puts mug down on table and shakes Alan's shoulder.

SARAH Wakey, wakey! Coffee up. (She moves away towards kitchen exit)

ALAN sits up, surprised. He stares at Sarah for a second, then remembers.

ALAN (loud groan) Oh, no! let me die! (clutches his head).

SARAH rushes to him.

SARAH Alan, love, what's wrong? (bends over him). Oh, Alan, are you crying? Look, come on, let's get you up.

SARAH helps Alan up from his chair. She guides him over to the sofa. Alan goes willingly. He looks wretched.

ALAN sits on sofa staring straight ahead. SARAH fetches the mug of tea.

SARAH (puts mug in Alan's hand) It's still hot. You'll feel better in a minute.

ALAN takes a few sips. He hands the mug back to Sarah.

ALAN That's it. I'll never feel better again, ever.

SARAH (Sits next to him on sofa) Tell me. Is it that company?

ALAN (Nods dumbly) You were right, Sarah. I've been conned. Well and truly taken for a ride. Ironic, don't you think? I got carried away, didn't see the gaping pothole.

ALAN edges away from Sarah. Sarah leans closer and puts a hand on his leg. ALAN removes her hand.

ALAN I'm vile. I'm contaminated. You don't want to go anywhere near me. You, or Liz, or any of the family. (Sinks head into hands, despondent).

SARAH gets up. She moves to back of sofa.

ALAN I've lost all our money, Sarah. Every last penny. (shouts) Conned by Wilf!

SARAH (leans over, close to Alan's ear) Wilf?

ALAN gets up. He goes to Sarah and takes both her hands in his.

ALAN I'm sorry, Sarah. It's my fault for being so mean. I should have let you have your car.

SARAH doesn't respond. ALAN drops her hands.

ALAN Well go ahead, punch me or something! I don't care if you go out, buy a gun and shoot me! Or whack me over the head with a saucepan. Anything. I deserve it.

SARAH Just sit down, Alan.

ALAN sits at table. SARAH smiles at him.

ALAN It's not funny.

SARAH It is, actually, because now I'm the one with all our money. I've completely cleaned you out.

ALAN stares at her open-mouthed.

SARAH You've been corresponding with me. I'm Wilf.

ALAN (Hands to his mouth) Oh, my god! Then we've—you've still got— (gets up and goes to Sarah) You must buy your car. Get onto Jameson right away; ask him to reserve it for you.

SARAH Already done, thanks, Alan. And I've not used all the money, obviously.

ALAN (Enthusiastic) When we get out of this lockdown, you could drive me to Silverstone and—.

SARAH stops him, with a hand to his mouth. She seizes his dressing-gown lapels.

SARAH Come here, you. Don't bother getting dressed. We've got a date.

SARAH laughs and giggles as ALAN chases her off stage.

Curtain. End

Super Sanitized Santa by Wendy Turner

It was a cold and frosty day with the pale sun dimly beaming
The air around was sharp and crisp with the white snow gently gleaming
Santa in his workshop sat, his hammer softly tapping
With his trusty reindeer Rudolph, who'd spent the morning napping

Santa lit a Hamlet and settled with a smile
He puffed away contentedly musing for a while
Dreaming dreams of chimney pots, his Dr Martens tapping
He'd tuned into Radio One and the Funky Boys were rapping

Santa rose and stretched and yawned. He gazed around the workshop
His packing crew were on tea break and work had come to a full stop
"Oh, dearie me," he muttered, seeing Rudolph in a heap,
"Rudolph, take those earphones off and come and earn ya keep."

Rudolph jumped up wide awake and started on the parcels
And picked up in his gentle hooves, kites and drums and castles
Clowns and dolls and spidermen, bows and arrows and quivers
"This is no darn good," he said, "I can't hold the scissors."

Just then the doorbell rang, and there was seated in the snow
The prettiest little reindeer, with pink nose all aglow
"It's Rosie!" Rudolph cried, as he kissed her snowy cheek lightly,
"Just keep your hooves to yourself," she said, "and don't you be so flighty."

Rosie stepped inside and looked around the wild array
"Oh dear," she said, "there's so much to do, we'll get busy right away.
And you can work right through," she said, poking Santa's rounded paunch
"While I go and put this haddock in the microwave for lunch."

Said Rudolph, "Santa, what's all this? Loo rolls and pasta aplenty
Looks like you've been busy, no wonder the shops are empty
Have you been bulk-buying? Where did you get this lot from?"
"From fairy-gifts and pretty-prezzies and cashandcarry.com."

"Come here, Rudolph," Santa said, "we have to make sure you're fit
We've got to protect the NHS. Have you got all your kit?
Got your antiseptic handwipes? Have you sanitized your hooves?"
"You need to hose them down my boy," said Rosie, "ain't that the truth."

“Now for your mask,” said Santa. “It’s easy enough to do.”
“It’s stuck on my horns,” cried poor Rudolph. “I’ll never get them through.”
“Let me give it a tug,” said Rosie, “It’s supposed to go over your nose.”
“Well, that’s very clever,” said Rudolph. “It’s now around my toes.”

The three of them worked through the day till the twinkling stars appeared
And Santa smiled a beaming smile and stroked his sagging beard.
“Now to load the sleigh,” he cried, “Oh dear, it looks so black out.”
He lifted one enormous sack and—oh dear—put his back out.

“Help me, I’m stuck,” poor Santa cried, one hand on his lower spine.
“Have a night off,” kind Rudolph said, “we two can manage just fine.
Now sit down here and watch TV with the fairies and the gnomes,
You can watch Match of the Day—the Gunners are playing at home.”

“Well hurry up,” bellowed Santa. “You’ve got a lot to do
Read the list of presents and load the sleigh up too.
Here’s some plastic gloves and Dettol wipes, now off you jolly well go.”
“All right, keep your beard on, I’m not Usain Bolt, you know.”

Rudolph found his NHS specs and gazed at the starry sky,
“Ah, there’s the Plough and the Milky Way, that’s what we’ll be guided by.
If we can do this quick,” he said, “we’ll stop off for a bacon sandwich.”
“Oh, you’re so romantic,” said Rosie, with her nose a-twitch.

Off went Rudolph, galloping through the falling snow,
Rosie held her hat on and gazed at the world below.
“Strewth, this is tough going,” panted Rudolph before long,
“Why don’t you put a CD on, with some jolly Christmas songs.”

Rosie rummaged through the box, “Don’t want Kylie or Madonna,
Ah, I’ve found the perfect thing, we’ll have some Des O’Connor.”
“Yippee!” cried Rudolph, prancing about, “Oh, slow down,” Rosie said,
“All the parcels are falling about and there’s labels all over the sled.”

“Never mind,” said Rudolph, “we’ve reached our destination
If you unload the presents, I’ll begin the circulation.”
“It’s a terrible mess,” said Rosie, “bits and pieces everywhere.”
“They can sort it all out in the morning,” said Rudolph with never a care.

The reindeer sat round the chimneys, slapping the labels back on
“I don’t know about you,” grumbled Rudolph, “I’m sure I’m doing it wrong.”
“You are,” Rosie said, “look at this, Granny’s got a Philishave
And Grandad’s got some polka dot tights, won’t he be all the rave.”

The two of them worked through the night, till the pale moon faded away
And morning found them weary and worn as they plodded back to the sleigh
“What a terrible night,” grumbled Rudolph, “that really wasn’t cricket,
And look at this,” he said in dismay, “I’ve got a parking ticket.”

But the miles flew past quickly, and soon they were back in the cave
And opened the door to see Santa, who gave them a cheery wave.
“Come on in,” he bellowed, waving a bottle of Teachers
“We’re having a Christmas party with all the woodland creatures.

But we have to keep to two metres, so we don’t snort each other’s air
The fairies can sit on the toadstools, and the gnomes can bubble in pairs
Have a magical distanced Christmas,” Santa whispered secretly
And they sang and danced until sunset, in their hideaway, happily.

Charlie's World by Dave Weaver

When Charlie gave that first choking cough, Maria ignored him, barely turning her eyes from the news on the portable television in the kitchen. He'd tried to get off school before by pretending a cold; anything to dodge the agony of the friendless.

"Charlie is a bright but lonely boy..." read the first lines of his junior school report. He was different from the other kids. The specialist had quoted a medical term to Maria.

"Try to get him to talk more, make some friends. It might help him." But Charlie hadn't seen the point.

"It's like he's in a world of his own sometimes..." he'd overheard his mother reply as he patiently sat in the waiting room.

Now he coughed again, more intensely, and Maria's head turned to him as if she'd been slapped. "Charlie darling, what is it?"

On the little TV screen, an embarrassed-looking man was being asked complicated questions by an angry young woman reporter. She looked angrier every time he said the words *under control*. He'd said them at least five times when the screen suddenly switched to the league tables. These were on all the time now, and every day the figures got bigger. Their town, St Albans, was in the top two hundred. Others, such as nearby Luton and Watford where they'd go on their shopping trips, were much higher and faraway places like Liverpool and Manchester where the big football clubs came from were at the top, just like in the Premier League.

He felt hot and cold at the same time, then shivery. He couldn't smell anything. Then he coughed again, a horrible dry rasp that made his mother rush around the kitchen table.

"Charlie, oh my God..."

The people from the track'n'trace took less than an hour to get there. The hospital at Welwyn Garden seemed to be choked with people. The ambulance sped straight around the back of a building set away from the rest with *Stay out* signs and yellow tape around its entrance, like a crime scene on CSI.

He was taken straight to a bed. Maria tried to give him a last rushed hug but was stopped, then led away by two determined looking nurses.

"I'll be waiting for you, Charlie. I'll be out there..." He saw her point to somewhere over her shoulder as the double doors swallowed them up.

He didn't see Maria for three days. Embarrassed and scared, he'd cried at first. The nurses had been kind to him, though, especially the younger ones.

"How's our Charlie today?" they'd ask with smiling eyes above their masks as they brought him his meals and took his temperature and walked him unsteadily to the toilet. They seemed nice but he'd often hear them snapping in tired, shrill voices through his curtains. His coughing had been very bad at night, but then others in the room would join in making the same harsh noises in the darkness, like wolves howling at the moon. He would imagine himself a wolf cub in their pack as he slid into sleep.

When Charlie finally saw his mum again, she was surrounded by white-coated doctors. His arms and legs ached all the time now. Occasionally he felt dizzy, as if someone kept putting him back on a merry-go-round he was trying to get off.

“Hello Charlie, how you doing love? Charlie, the doctors here want to take you to a place called Oxford. Some clever people are going to do some tests on you and make you all better. Is that all right?” He could see tear tracks disappearing behind the blue cotton mask and nodded sleepily. She hugged him tightly and whispered, “We’ll go home together one day, Charlie. I promise.” He fell asleep in her arms.

When he awoke, he was somewhere else.

Charlie was in a big glass box now. There were similar boxes stretching to either side and another row across a gleaming white corridor in front of him. Each box had a bed surrounded by greeny-blue plastic curtains, some of which were drawn apart to show a child surrounded by computers with screens full of dancing, coloured lines. He slowly became aware that the machines were in his room too. There were wires going from them to his head and a plastic tube thing stuck into his arm. He began to struggle.

After the nurse and the young doctor had calmed him down, they explained he was in a *research laboratory ward*, a bit like a hospital, only all the patients were kept *isolated* to stop their germs spreading. This made it easier for the doctors to try different vaccines on them until they found the one that worked. Then they could give it to everybody in the world, including Charlie’s mother.

The young doctor noticed Charlie’s frown and swore to himself. “Everyone’s sick now, Charlie.”

There followed endless days of boredom, interrupted by injections and pills. Gradually, he began to feel better. The other children came and went. Some had birthdays, their parents arriving with brightly wrapped presents. Maria never came, though, and after a while the others stopped coming as well. Charlie thought the nurses started buying the presents themselves. Eventually, he was the only one left.

One day everyone seemed happier. The nurse bringing his breakfast that morning beamed at him, “How’s our miracle boy then?”

He didn’t know what she’d meant, but a week later she was crying. “It’s not your fault, Charlie. You’ve been blessed and the rest of us are cursed!”

His pocket diary announced today was his birthday. He was seven, but no-one had brought him any presents. The young doctor hadn’t visited him for over a month, and the last time he’d been white-faced and shivering.

“So long, my little freak!” he’d shouted through the glass. Then he’d turned and staggered away. It had upset Charlie, but the nurse had explained that the young doctor was very ill. Now she had disappeared as well.

At lunchtime, Charlie got out of bed and tried his door. It opened. He walked down the long white corridors until he found the cafeteria. There was no-one around. All the food smelt bad, but he got a can of coke and a packet of crisps and began to eat.

He took out his diary and stared into space for a while. Then he carefully made a list, like the one his mother did before they went shopping: ‘Tins of food, bottles of water, warm coat, big boots. Somewhere to stay until...’

Until...?

He was going to be like Robinson Crusoe, he thought, and smiled. All on his own until he was rescued.

And Charlie’s world began.

Is your Journey Really Necessary? by Ben Bergonzi

This slogan originated in the dark days of World War II when there was an urgent need to husband the country's resources. The government could have reintroduced it again in 2020.

But, in autumn 2019 it seemed inconceivable that the rat race of commuting would ever come to an end. I was reflecting on ten years of doing a 40 mile round trip, 5 days a week, around the congested and dangerous M25, spending 1½ - 2 hours in the car, and paying a price for it both in terms of the petrol I was buying, and the pollution I was causing. To meet a competition brief where we were asked to describe a single measure that would greatly improve everyone's quality of life, I wrote a piece railing against these long daily commutes, and trying to think of some way they could be brought to an end, some way that society might allow me, and thousands like me, to do our data-and email-based jobs from home. Of course I could not imagine what lay around the turn of the year, but it is tempting to believe that the hubris of people beetling around in their cars is meeting a deserved punishment at the hands of Providence, or God Almighty, or Mother Nature, call it what you will.

Nowadays we live in a world where private journeys have increased several hundredfold, where we buzz around in our cars all week and then fly off in planes for weekend city breaks. This has led to the greenhouse effect and climate change with forest fires in the jungles and particulate pollution in the cities. And so we have a backlash, with environmental protestors setting up tents on London's main roads and gluing themselves onto all sorts of inappropriate surfaces.

Most of us, though, like our freedoms, our holidays, our cars.

But I wonder, is it real freedom?

How many people sitting in the average queue of 100 single-occupancy cars at 8.30 on a wet morning are really enjoying freedom? Where are they actually all going day after day?

If you asked them, they'd say, "Going to work." But not quite. They are going to their *workplace*.

I wonder how many are really going to the *only* place where they can work? How many are actually going to stand behind a counter or at a lectern and talk to people? How many are going to use fixed plant in a factory or laboratory?

No, a good majority of all workers these days will be sitting in front of a computer for most or all of the day. And the customers they serve are increasingly communicating via the screen not via the voice, let alone the personal meeting. We move data rather than stuff.

So why are we so keen to get to the office?

I believe the answer lies in guilty adherence to the Victorian work ethic, the widely held notion that work involves being in a place other than home. This began 200 years ago (relatively recently in historical terms) when the Industrial Revolution meant workers had to travel to the new factories. Before that work (by tailors, cobblers, weavers, blacksmiths, ploughmen and the like) was done in the home or very near. The journey to work would be downstairs or at most a walk over the fields. Neighbours were co-workers, companions in adversity and success, not people glimpsed fleetingly between car door and house door.

Through technology many of us have the means to work at home again. But we don't want to do it. We don't want to miss out on gossip, on the overheard (such a valuable source of information), on the chance to look good in the eyes of bosses. Being there every day makes us feel more essential, that our job is more secure. Fear of Missing Out is a major issue in the online world, but how much more in the world of work?

We hate the idea of hot desking, of not having that bit of our own 'property' on our employers' premises, our desks complete with family photos, spare cardigans and maybe shoes. We get very cross if we don't get free parking. After all, aren't we earning enough money for the bosses? And so we trundle around the crowded roads wasting time, belching fumes, tiring ourselves, all for the ritual of daily attendance. A recent survey reported that 51% of UK workers spend an hour or more each day travelling to and from work, with 38% reporting that at least 15 minutes of this hour is spent waiting in traffic. It costs us money and it costs the planet.

But we go on doing it. I'm a case in point. I work with my eyes on a screen and often headphones on my ears, to drown out the incessant talk from co-workers analysing last night's TV or pondering the care of aged parents. But I do feel reluctant to ask to work at home too often. No one wants to be first, to stand out, to be seen to be taking too large a slice of the limited "perk pie".

These psychological barriers will only come down through joint action from employer and worker. Eventually, this nonsense will have to stop. We're bugging up our planet for the sake of our fears over job security. Society needs to understand that a permanent desk and the daily journey are not virtuous, but rather the reverse. Something rather out-moded and antisocial like putting your rubbish in the wrong bin or eating red meat or buying single use coffee cups. What if an employer could polish up its environmental credentials, even claim carbon credits, based on the number of home-working days every year? What if each adult was given a carbon budget they could choose to use either in commuting to a far flung job or else rationally agreeing not to come in more than once or twice a week? Then the message would filter through to the workers that working at home is not a perk or a bit cheeky, but is an essential tool in saving the planet. (Even if it does mean you have to feel guilty at staying in bed a bit longer in the mornings.)

So now—February 2021—I do have the benefit of staying in bed later, I am enjoying the quietness on the roads, and cycling has become a real pleasure. I am also, of course, very bored, quite anxious and rather annoyed...

The Snow Bear by Barbara Cooper

I am standing at my kitchen window looking out at the snow-covered garden. I stare at the snow, wishing for something to happen because nothing happens anymore, I don't go anywhere, I don't do anything, I don't see anyone. There used to be a world out there but it's gone. Everything's turned into nothing. As I stand there, desperate for better things, I'm startled to see a large brown bear shambling along the garden path towards the house.

I know I'm bored, I know I'm lonely, I know I'm fed up and scared of this endless Covid virus. I know I'm tired of each day being exactly the same as the one before and the one after, though this snow has proved to be a bit of a novelty. I go for walks round the empty streets and I drive the car to charge the battery but I don't actually go anywhere. I buy petrol just to go round in circles. The only people I see are runners or cyclists or dog walkers. The dogs are friendly but the people keep their distance. We nod as we pass each other, spaced out across the paths. Some people don't even look at me. Everything's so weird, I feel as if I've been caught up in a horror film. In ten years' time no-one'll believe this. I don't think I'll be alive in ten years, anyway. Covid'll have got me by then and I'll die in this house and no-one'll know. And these stupid masks steam up my specs. But, really, a bear! In my garden? Why a bear? Why not a giraffe or a hippo?

Have I flipped? I must have. I've dreaded this moment. I knew it would come sooner or later. These lockdowns have a lot to answer for. I can feel my brain getting softer day by day. Like a mouldy apple. It won't be long before it's just a mushy mess inside my skull. I'm hallucinating. No sane person would see a brown bear in their back garden.

I need a strong coffee and put the kettle on. This bear-thing is out of control, just an illusion in my addled brain. It will be sure to have gone by the time I've finished the coffee and go to the window again. Why on earth would there be a bear in my garden? Why am I thinking about bears anyway? It must be something I saw on TV. I'm watching too much TV anyway. What else is there to do? I go into the sitting room and see the cat asleep on the armchair, where she shouldn't be. If there's a bear in the garden and snow as well—she hates the snow—she'll never go out to do her whatsits.

I look out of the window again, expecting this bear to have disappeared but it's still there. It's plodding past the water butt and the greenhouse, shaking the snow off its paws with each step. I don't want to see it. It scares me, not so much because it's a bear, which is bad enough, but because it's evidence of my mental state. Half my brain says, "Don't be stupid, it isn't a bear," while the other half says it is a bear and I'm going potty. I switch on the TV to distract myself but all I get is doom-laden statistics from well-meaning pundits with serious faces, and feeble, jolly interludes designed to cheer me up.

The cat wakes up and tries to sit on my lap but I fidget too much so she goes to the window and sits on the sill. Then her tail stiffens and twitches, her ears prick and flatten, she's in danger-mode, stiff, tight, hard. She hisses, spits and squeals, turns and runs so fast she takes the corner too wide and bashes her head on the wall but keeps going along the hall

and flies up the stairs. So that's it then, it's not just me. There really is something scary in the garden. She's seen it, too or has Covid addled her brain as well?

Suddenly the kitchen window darkens and this bear, this blip in my brain, this impossible creature, is standing on the outside doormat staring in at me, his forepaws flat against the glass. I can see the pads on his feet and his long sharp claws, his black shiny nose. He's huge. I hope his weight won't break the glass. I stare back at him, my mouth open, hardly breathing. My heart is banging, my mouth is dry. Will he smash the window, break the door down, come in the house? How can he do these things if he's only in my head? His breath steams up the window but I can still see his teeth.

This can't be true. I stare back at him, trying to make him disappear but he blinks at me. I walk away from him clutching the walls and the furniture because my legs are shaking so much I think I'll fall over. I crawl up the stairs and find the cat cowering under the bed. I sit on the bed and decide that, yes, I'm not just dreaming and yes, I have gone mad. This bear is an illusion caused by too much chocolate, too much Christmas pudding, too much wine. Or too many lockdowns, too many regulations, too many predictions. He's indigestion or lack of sleep. I do not want to go mad, but I'm scared because I already have. I begin to panic. I don't know what to do.

I phone the RSPCA. They know about animals. They'll sort it out for me.

"Good morning, how can I help you?" She sounds reassuringly calm.

I clear my throat. "I think I've found a bear in my garden," I say in a wobbly voice—it sounds so ridiculous. "Can you come and pick it up?" And what would the local RSPCA do with a bear?

"Pardon?" she says.

"A bear."

She doesn't believe me. "Really? A bear?" Then she says, "Is it hurt?"

"I don't think so. It's sitting outside my back door."

"Just a minute," she says and there's a long pause and I hear voices on the end of the line, then a man picks up the phone. "I'm sorry, madam," he says before I can say anything, "we don't deal with bears, especially with these Covid restrictions. We're cats and dogs mainly, domestic pets."

"But what am I to do with it?"

"I really can't say, madam. I'm very sorry. Perhaps you should contact a mental health charity." He puts the phone down with a decisive click and I'm left wondering why my bear would need a mental health charity.

It's beginning to snow again, softly, slowly at first. The garden is clouded in a mist of snowflakes. I'm sure I can see the bear from here, sitting on the outside mat by the kitchen

door. I think I can see its short stumpy tail, its wide furry backside. The snow is settling on its back. From up here it looks like a big round boulder. It doesn't look like a bear at all. Perhaps it isn't a bear. Stupid woman, of course, it's not a bear. I feel foolish for having phoned the RSPCA about a boulder, then I wonder why there'd be a boulder on my back doorstep. The snow falls thicker, big feathery flakes.

I see the bear move away from the door as he turns round and shakes the snow from his back and shambles along the garden path back past the greenhouse and the frozen water butt. Then he disappears round the corner by the shed. I watch to see if he'll come back. The snow fills and hides his paw prints. He doesn't come back. Has he gone, really gone? I wait a long time before I'm brave enough to go downstairs. There's no sign of him in the garden. The snow is thick and smooth. It's as if he's never been here. Has he been here? Of course not. You don't get bears in suburban gardens. How can I be so stupid? He's just a trick, a lie, a mistake. The wires in my brain have got crossed. I'll have to take up a new hobby to stop myself seeing things, hallucinating, imagining bears. I'll be seeing pink elephants next.

But my heart is thumping. I'm frightened. These lockdowns have really addled my brain. Why would I imagine a bear in my garden? It's just crazy. I am seriously worried about my mental health and am beginning to panic, so I phone 111.

"A bear, you say? You sure?" She's very kind, concerned, anxious for me.

"Oh, yes, quite sure." My voice comes out breathless and squeaky.

"Just a moment, dear." She goes away. When she comes back, she says, "I'm going to give you a phone number, dear. Are you listening, dear? Have you got a pencil? These people will look after you." She repeats the number three times, slowly and carefully as if she talking to a small child. She thinks I'm mad, they all think I'm mad. I think I'm mad, too. This is what these lockdowns do to you. If you never see anyone, how can you know you're all right? There's no-one to tell you when you do something stupid. You just keep on getting madder and madder and nobody knows what's happening to you and you end up completely ga-ga, which is what's happening to me so I slam the phone down and go to bed. I pull the duvet over my head and hope to quietly suffocate in the dark.

Several weeks later, when the snow has melted and gone and the snowdrops and crocuses are beginning to show, and I've had my vaccinations and some restrictions have been lifted and the memory of my imaginary bear has turned into a mere fancy and I don't believe it any more, I go out into the garden. The sun is pale and warm, the sky is clear, the birds are singing. It's all good except the cat's disappeared. I haven't seen her for about a week. The ice on the water butt has thawed, the greenhouse needs tidying up and I'll have to cut the grass. I'll make plans for the garden for the summer, buy some seeds and compost, buy some plants I haven't had before. I go to the shed for the mower to clean and oil it before using it.

In the far corner there's an unfamiliar pile of what looks like cloth. It moves slightly. Perhaps it's the cat. I call her name but it isn't her. I find the mower and pull it out of the corner and shift an old pile of sacking and newspapers and there's a surprise. My bear is here,

on the sacking, his head resting on his paws, his body curled up, his black nose shining wet. He shifts his head and blinks at me and shuts his eyes again. I touch his head. He's real, there really is a live brown bear in my shed.

So I didn't imagine him, after all. He isn't a fancy and he's not a figment of my addled brain as I'd feared. He's in my shed and I'm not mad. I really did see him on the garden path in the snow all those weeks ago. He'll wake up soon when it gets warmer. I decide to phone the zoo and they'll come and collect him. They must be wondering where he's been all this time.

"Good morning," I say. "Have you lost a bear?"

"Er, who's that speaking?"

"I've got a bear in my shed. Could it be yours?"

"Excuse me, just a minute."

I wait a long time. There are voices and laughter and then, "We have been missing a bear for some time but we didn't advertise it because we didn't want to cause any panic."

"I think your bear is sleeping in my shed."

"Hibernating. Is he well?"

"I think so but I'm no expert on bears."

"Has he been with you long? Thank God. We thought we'd never see him again."

"A few months, I think."

"We'll send a team round and a helicopter. Whatever you do, keep the door shut and don't touch him."

"Today?"

"This afternoon."

They block the street so the buses have to be diverted. There are police cars and sirens and flashing lights and men running about. People come out to watch what's going on. TV crews are filming every move. They talk to me at the end of their long microphones. The men trample on my garden shouting at each other and tranquilise my bear. They watch him carefully and check him over. He grunts a bit and then they heave him into a crate and drag him out onto the grass. The helicopter hovers and I say goodbye to him and tell him I'm sorry I didn't believe in him and the men fix the crate to the straps and up he goes, flying over the streets and houses, and then he's gone, my bear, my snow bear, swinging through the sky.

People point me out and wave and smile. Drivers pip their hooters, the buses return and the police open the road again and check I'm okay. Everything's back to normal. But it isn't normal any more. Things are different now. I'm an item on the news and I know I'm not

mad. I'm a celebrity, thanks to my bear, I'm "the woman with the bear." Journalists come round, take my photo and print my story. I'm front-page news Someone even wants to write my biography. They take me to the zoo and photo us together, me and my bear.

The zoo is officially closed because of Covid but they let me visit him every day for free. When he sees me coming, he shambles across the enclosure to greet me. We talk to each other through the fence and he stays close to me until I go home. He knows I'll be back.

Lockdown Hills by Judith Foster

This was the spring of lockdown,
And this was the summer of lockdown.
It sounds like a hill in Sussex.
But it was not.

I've worn my boots out on an easier way
Than Lakeland hills and Pyrenean paths,
Across the fields of Hertfordshire,
Five miles from home.

July sun smote hot on May's soft breast,
And when July came, rain came too,
But could not save the feeble barley,
Dried to shards.

Each coloured flower crept in its time
And place to glow among the others.
Blue and yellow yielded to white and red
In their due season.

The twitter, flutter of the courting birds
Became anxieties of parenting.
Grown birds stayed close; the young ones flew away.
Tired feathers fell.

Hotter and hotter still. I loved it,
Batting the wasps away who drank my sweat,
Tracking the trickle in my hollow back.
And then a shower.

How did the summer change my life?
In reaping the singular excitement
Of discovery of my own countryside.
Enough. Content.

Tabatha by Dave Weaver

I was sitting on that old rusty bench in the park, the one near the bandstand, lobbing stale bread at the pigeons. I was slightly drunk and although the day was still fresh, I wasn't. I'd rather let myself go. Judith wasn't around to keep me in check now—pathetic really.

I first saw the girl wreathed in mid-morning sunlight, not a girl so much as an insubstantial form that could have been a girl. As she walked towards me, an odd motion directly behind her flickered briefly. She carried on until we were quite close, a young woman with a pretty, puckish face in torn jeans and a pale blue T-shirt.

She stared at me for an uncomfortably long time, so long it occurred to me she might try to mug me. Luckily, I didn't have my pension book on me, but I'm quite frail these days and her intensity was unsettling. I reached up a hand to shield my eyes. She wore a strangely beguiling expression, not particularly aggressive, but one can't be too careful.

One of us had to speak first. "That's quite close enough. Can I help you?"

She smiled brightly, innocently. "You remind me of my granddad."

"I'm not sure if that's a compliment."

"Oh, it certainly is." She nodded, as if to emphasise the fact, then carried on. "I've seen you sitting here before. Sometimes you look a little lost, so I thought today you'd like some company."

"Been spying on me? I don't need any company, thanks all the same." She was an odd one.

"Oh right, enjoy being miserable then do you?" Despite the rather aggressive reply, the smile remained fixed, as if she was unaware of any rudeness. "You shouldn't reject an offer of help, you know. It might not come your way again."

Again, it was an odd thing to say, yet not passive-aggressive. More concerned. "How can someone like you help me?"

"Someone like me? Well..." She actually appeared to be considering the question. "We could talk about things, y'know, have a chat. Maybe something's on your mind you want to get rid of."

"Like what? Not that it's any of your business."

"I don't know... something you've done in the past maybe, something you've said that you regret. People mull things over when they think it's too late to take them back." She studied me with a comical frown. "You look like a mull-er-over-er."

"There's no such word."

“Well, there should be.” She pouted.

“Shouldn’t you be wearing a mask?”

“Don’t need one.”

“That’s just typical of the young,” I told her starchily, “so thoughtless of others. Look, I haven’t got all day so what is it you really want?”

“Like I said, just a chat. We could go back to your place if you like, Tom. I expect it’s in walking distance, as you don’t have a car anymore.”

“How do you know my name...?” It suddenly struck me. “Are you trying to pick me up, young lady?”

The expression became naively quizzical. “I don’t think so. I just thought you’d like to share some time with somebody other than yourself. I know how much you miss her.”

“Miss who?” This was a strange tack for a prostitute to take, but she seemed a little simple anyway. Perhaps it was some kind of comfort for the bereaved ploy to take advantage of the pandemic.

“The other one, Judith.”

I felt a ripple of shock at the mention of my wife’s name. “How...do you know Judith?”

“We met quite recently. Lovely lady. We all thought she was fab.” She grinned, widely.

“My wife died seven months ago in the first wave, so it can’t have been that recent. Were you in her class?”

“Yes, she said she was a schoolteacher. What a gift it must be to so love children.”

Yet another strange thing to say; almost hippy-ish. Yet this girl couldn’t have been more than eighteen. I realised I’d been mistaken about her way of speaking as well. It wasn’t simple so much as childlike, yet in the way of the old. She was no more a hustler than I was, but she knew about Judith, and me come to that—my habits, where I lived. What else, what was her game?

Almost in answer to that thought she said, “Judith loved you a great deal, you know, despite your grouchiness. She used that word, not me. I don’t think you’re grouchy, Tom, just a little sad. So, I’ve come to cheer you up and let you tell me about her. Anything you like. I won’t tell the others, unless it’s a bit naughty. Then I might!”

“Who are these others, friends of yours? Pupils?”

“Helpers. We like to help people.”

“And you’re attempting to help me, whether I like it or not.”

She half-turned, appearing startled at shouts from a group of young lads kicking a ball about, and I glimpsed two adjacent rips in the pale blue t-shirt near her shoulder blades. They weren’t like the manufactured ones on her jeans.

“Are you okay?” She turned back, face composed again, yet with a shadow of uncertainty. Now she seemed more urgent. “Please, tell me about your wife, Tom. If you think it might help to talk to a stranger.”

I sighed. Perhaps she was right. I didn’t know anymore.

“Judith was one of a kind. I... well, I could have been more helpful to her, more...” The words didn’t come easily. Then quite suddenly they did. “She was such a wonderful woman, so giving of herself to everyone. We couldn’t have children, damned or just unlucky, I don’t know. She must have had regrets but never made a thing of it because she was always there for her schoolkids, what she called her ‘family’. I often felt left out and would tell her so quite forcefully. That was unfair, cruel actually. I’ll never forgive myself for that. She deserved better from me, but I wasn’t the supportive kind. I was too self-obsessed, you see, to into my own little world. Now that world’s empty. I... don’t know if I can live in it anymore without her.”

My own words shocked me. I realised I’d been wanting, needing, to say them for some time since the funeral I’d been denied attending and, with that, the final chance for redemption with my Judith. Yet now I’d said those same words to a total stranger.

And I felt cleansed for it, more whole again than I’d been in months, in years.

Just like I was the day we first met.

“What’s your name?” I asked, but the girl was a blur against the sun again. I thought I heard *Tabatha*, but it was just a whisper on the breeze, masked by the beating of wings.

Short Poems and Haikus by Robert Paterson

Lockdown in a Nutshell

The whole world is locked down.
The roads are quiet and peaceful, but...
I can't go into town.

The Bad Poet's Lockdown

We have to stay at home.
If only I could think up rhymes;
So then I'd write a po'm.

Lockdown Pros and Cons

Living through Lockdown,
Sleeping in is attractive,
But I miss feeling active.

Lockdown Laziness

What is life in Lockdown?
It's DVD's at 1pm
In your dressing gown!

Lockdown at the Supermarket

Shopping in a mask;
It's safer but the checkout lady
Can't hear what I ask.

Stir Crazy

Lockdown has its perks.
I kept the house spotless and even built
A sausage roll skyscraper.

Covid Chronicles by Tina Shaw

Just two weeks ago we spent an overnight in a Bristol hotel to celebrate my sister in law's eightieth birthday. We had a bracing walk along the river and a pub lunch. That may be our only holiday this year as the rest are on the cancellation lists.

We came back to a week of relative normality. I got the car serviced, and the man came to check the alarm system, although he insisted on wearing gloves and refused to use our pen. My volunteering in schools and leisure centre activities continued as usual.

The government's suggestion that all over seventies should self-isolate resulted in a mixture of anger and guilt from the two seventy-plus members of this household. I shopped as normal on the Thursday and (fortunately) decided to pick up an extra packet of toilet paper and bars of soap, which I could probably flog on eBay for £10 a roll at the moment. I also brought a couple of extra meals to put in our small freezer.

On Friday our daughter popped round. That was lovely but we kept our distance, and she phoned later to say her brother had told her off for putting our lives at risk.

Our Rabbi had emailed to say he was self-isolating but would be streaming the service. I couldn't face it so visited a rival synagogue who were welcoming, if sparsely attended, but the unfamiliarity of the setup means I shall be trying out the streaming this week.

Meanwhile the cancellations were flooding in—AGMs, U3A meetings and regular walks. I had hoped we could continue walking a metre apart but it was not to be. The school governors' meeting became a communal phone-in, which just about worked. Volunteers were now being banned from schools so my week was looking progressively emptier.

My husband admitted to a persistent headache so we rummaged around for the old Fahrenheit thermometer which fortunately declared him under 98.4 (normal). Daughter also admitted to feeling unwell and, as she has asthma, I started imagining all sorts of disasters.

I managed to speak to my neighbour, after we had been ignoring each other for a year following a dispute over a party wall. She said she was fine and thanked me for asking.

The last bastion fell yesterday. The leisure centres have closed. At least it will stop our son nagging us to be sensible.

Battlefield by Clare Lehovsky

This is war, we should tell ourselves that,
Before it was us against our kind,

Now it is us against the dark winds
Of a world changed forever

Then the young were ageing beyond their years,
Now the same too with our young

Flying wooden and metal harbingers of death
Wide-eyed juniors in full body

Against summer skies, no idea of the future
They understand too, those sleepless nights

Dreaming they could not stop the enemy
Taking never-forgotten souls away,

Following the orders of the few,
Not understanding why doing so,

The only difference is that now
The battlefield is in the colour blue,

And the fliers who carried them stand alone
In empty hangars and empty halls,

Listening out for just one footstep, one moan,
So that they could tell what they know,

And thus keep the dark wind from whistling
Over fields, seas, and lands,

To keep those who need to be remembered alive
In memory, in song, and in the skies

This poem is based on my experience of working in an empty RAF Museum (in Hendon) and also the plight of junior doctors now, drawing on what I have heard from my sister and her fiancé working in Covid wards.

Spring on the River Bank by Ben Bergonzi

“I need this lockdown to go on and on,” said Morry Jeskins as he nibbled his housekeeper’s ear.

“Maybe weeks, hm?” said Magda Malinowska, stroking the back of his head, keeping her hand well below the bald part. “But what then? Janice comes back?”

They were sitting on the top patio looking out across half an acre of perfect striped lawns that sloped down to the River Thames. As every evening of that silent, golden spring, all was still. None of the pleasure cruisers between Marlow and Henley were chugging to and fro.

“I’m not so sure,” he said comfortably. “Anyway, I’m doing pretty well from it. Both in business and”—he put down his gin and ran a finger over her breast—“personally.”

She took his hand and murmured, “Later,” and moved it away. “Your van drivers and your pizza cooks?”

“Not to mention the latex factory, thank you.” He didn’t add that the government was meeting half his monthly payroll and the remaining workers had been given a ten percent wage cut. “But Janice is going to have a long break, think things over. We had a call this afternoon, while you were spraying the weedkiller.” (Magda’s husband, Stan, was the official gardener, but the lockdown had caught him out on a visit to mother back in Poland, and she didn’t think he was in any hurry to come back.) “She’s down by the sea, the only guest in a hotel that’s closed down for the duration, but I know the people. They’ll do a favour to my wife.”

“You have told her about me?”

“I may not have to. Come here, you.” Morry leaned over her, swamping her in a tongue-thrusting kiss.

The next morning Morry was awake well before Magda, sitting up in bed, clicking buttons on his laptop. She nuzzled towards him, where she’d lain last night before he’d proprietorially clambered up on top of her, but now his only response was a murmured, “Lovely,” which could almost have referred to the figures on the computer screen. Then he said, “Tuesday. You’ll dust in the library, Hoover the cinema room, ashtrays of course, ironing of course, and I did see a cobweb above the back stairs so have a look there, that’s a good girl. Lunch in the garden room please.”

Between her duties, she spent the day roaming through the silent house, fourteen spotless rooms on each floor and a kitchen as long as a church. Meanwhile Morry was working in his secluded office which looked out to the private wood, barking instructions into his Skype screen. She compared this to houses she had seen on Zoopla and wondered how

much it would fetch. Seven million? Ten million? More? She had the run of the property with the exception of a locked room beyond the wine cellar, which she thought was his walk-in freezer. Something to do with pepperoni pizzas.

Eventually, late afternoon, he put his head round the door and called, “Another fine evening. Dinner on the patio. Gin first, hm.”

Once they’d finished their lamb chops and new potatoes, he lit up and leaned back in his chair and watched as his cigar smoke rose into the cool blue light. As if to himself, he said, “There are some legal matters on behalf of Janice. I don’t need to go into all the details. We’ve been working by email. But now she has to appear in a video conference.”

He looked at Magda.

“But,” she asked, “can she not do it from where she is?”

“She’s off grid.”

Magda reached around and stroked behind his head again, but this time she ran the point of her fingernail around his ear. “And it won’t wait?”

He grasped her finger and brought it towards his mouth and gave it a suck. “No. It’s important to me.”

Magda felt a question rise in her mind, but she consciously closed it down. Instead, she thought of Zoopla. “Yes. I understand.”

“Good.” He pushed her finger away and sat up. “Now, our solicitor, Matt Beckett, has only seen Janice once, years ago. You know some of my friends have remarked on a resemblance—you and Janice, hm?”

“Yes, but I’m... much younger.” (Magda was forty-nine but wild horses would not have dragged the precise figure from her.)

“You’ll be wearing a mask for most of the conversation.”

“Who wears a mask in their own house?”

“You’re not supposed to be here, remember. You’re in a hotel. We’ll use the top spare room. And you can say you’re wearing the mask because a maintenance man is in the room. A plumber. Your shower’s been playing up.” She looked at him with a mixture of admiration and scepticism. “I can borrow your husband’s overalls and walk past while you’re on camera, carrying a tool box. Of course, Beckett won’t see my face.”

“Of course. Yes, you do think of everything.” She leaned back and let him kiss her.

The next day, on Skype, Mr Beckett seemed convinced. He accepted Magda's explanation about the mask, and he made no comment on the passing of the portly boiler-suited figure behind her.

"So, Mrs Jeskins, to sum up," he concluded, after ten minutes' pleasantries (Magda had said the sea air was quite refreshing but she missed her home and would be going back there soon), "we have set aside the previous provision made for the children of your first marriage so your last will and testament simply leaves all your estate to Mr Jeskins."

"Yes, that was my intention," she said, as slowly and correctly as she could. "Thank you indeed Mr Beckett." (Morry had told her to think of alternatives to "very" so as not to risk the giveaway of the strong Polish R.)

"Once travel becomes a little easier, I will quite willingly come down and see you both, get your signature in person, though the law does allow me to work via email in these unusual circumstances."

"I hope they will not last for long." But she gave a little cough behind her mask.

"So, do I, Mrs Jeskins, so do I. Very good to see you today."

Once the Skype call was ended, Morry was back next to her and she stood up to return his embrace.

"Well done, darling, he swallowed that hook line and sinker. Proud of you, hm."

"But you're the clever one who thought of it, Morry."

"You've done so well we might want you to make a phone call or two, hm?"

A few days later, Morry's landline rang. It was his elderly next door neighbour, who lived beyond the private wood and a spiked fence. "There's a car in the trees. I think it's come off our driveway. I don't know how long it's been there; I've been ill in bed for a week. Oddly enough it looks like Janice's Mini."

Janice's Mini it certainly was, and Janice herself was in it. The police had been looking for her since Morry had reported her missing after receiving a strange voicemail message where she said she was not feeling at all well, having trouble breathing, but was on her way back from Dorset. "Oh my God" said Morry, "I never knew it would be like this. To die alone, and so near the house."

There had been a coroner's inquest but no post mortem because of the infection risk. The cause of death had been certified as suffocation and pneumonia associated with the Covid 19 virus.

And now it was the following spring, 2021.

The weather was typical for April and the river cruisers were back. Although all was not quite normal in the land, and elderly people were still tending to stay indoors, Mr Beckett had indeed managed to make his personal visit. But instead of meeting Mrs Janice Jeskins, he had now met Mrs Magda Jeskins, and obtained Morry's signature on his revised Will.

Once they were alone that evening, this time looking at the rainswept river from behind the panoramic windows of the garden room, Morry raised his gin glass and clinked Magda's. "You caught on very well to what I had in mind, dear. I think it's best this way, don't you? After all it could have been true. The virus I mean. There was still a lot of it about."

"Still is, I hear," said Magda graciously, "specially with men."

He patted her leg. "Here's to getting all my ducks in a row, hm? Cheers." He drank deep. "Something funny about this gin. You've not been getting tonic from Tesco's again?" Then he realised it was much worse than that, but he wasn't quite sure why. After all, he had never drunk weedkiller before.

Magda helped him sit down comfortably but ignored all his feeble gasped requests for an ambulance. Once he was quiet and his skin was cooling, she went to the large computer in his office and opened Zoopla.

Covid 19 by John Spencer

We have just entered a new year with Covid 19, after having lived with it for almost all of the previous year.

We know what we have been through, and we know what the future is predicted to be: vaccinations and a gradual easing off of isolation as we gradually defeat the virus.

But what if the future changes? It already has changed as far as we know.

I say as far as we know because it is unclear whether or not the government has told us the truth all the way along, or whether they have eased out the truths more slowly to avoid frightening people into a rebellion. If they had said, from the beginning, that we would be in lockdown for twelve months and that it would be several years before anything approaching normal would come out, people might well not have gone along with the rules as well as they did. In fact, there virtually has been a reaction against the rules and it is unclear if that is because people have given up, or disbelieve the government, or reject the fact that they are expected to obey rules the government and their scientists clearly do not obey.

One question arising from that is, why have so many government officers, the PM and the Health Secretary for two, and chief scientists as well, all had Covid? Were they just unlucky? Or did they know that it would be better to get it early when the NHS could treat them, or even knowing that all viruses evolve and they generally evolve towards a longer-lasting, and more virulent, version?

But what might the future hold if all does not go according to plan, whether or not that plan is actually known to the government already?

One thing is that question of evolution. I don't know when 'flu started but it's been with us for at least a hundred years. Many people die from it every year. Every year new vaccines are created for new variants and most of those 'flu-jabs work quite well, yet still deaths are high. We are all thinking that Covid is a virus that we will vaccinate against. But could Covid be something we will live with for the rest of time, constantly trying to vaccinate against it and succeeding, but not totally? Almost certainly so, but right now, in the middle of the pandemic is probably not the time the government would like to announce that.

Another thing on evolution is, what if the variants become so changed that the vaccines have no effect at all? All the work done to develop the vaccines would be pointless, all the jabs useless, and everyone exposed to a new variant so different it could be Covid 20 or onwards. Can the government tell everyone to go into some sort of lockdown for ever? Almost certainly not so we would just be faced with a new and active form of death we all have to face. For ever. Even if the government acknowledges that they would not want to speak about it now.

We are all looking forward to this year being the year we will get back to normal. But what if we have to deal with lockdowns for five years or more? Or deal with Covid for ever?

2020 – Laugh or You'll Cry by Rebecca Nesbit

The dawn of a global pandemic
sadly struck in Twenty-Nineteen.
The state of Wuhan is where it began,
then unfolded a terrible scene.
We don't know which species it came from,
though we think that they got it from bats.
There were rumours a lab had released it,
which led to political spats.

So Europe was plunged into lockdown,
our liberties all were revoked.
Some of us sprang into action,
while others just ate, drank and smoked.
The lockdown was tough for all parents,
and each person confined to the house.
Some went out of their minds, left their senses behind,
when trapped all alone with their spouse.

Politics made lots of blunders,
MPs spread some incredible lies.
'Inject us with bleach!' said the man like a peach,
so Nobel passed him up for a Prize.
Our leader, he tried to be Churchill
and made pleas in a cringeworthy speech,
but the people were keen to ignore him,
and flocked to join crowds on the beach.

We valued the people around us,
the neighbours who live down the street.
Though we see friends on Zoom, when they're in the room,
it feels like a wonderful treat.
We gathered in parks and in gardens,
in parties of no more than six.
We tried to maintain social distance...
at least till we'd had a few drinks.

Lots of us ate too much chocolate
and put on a fair bit of weight.
We bought food online, drank too much wine,
and got out of bed far too late.
We found ways to keep up our fitness,
with video workouts at home.

We did yoga on living room carpets,
and counted our steps on our phones.

We supported our carers with rainbows
and clapped from our doorways at eight.
Though they lacked PPE, some worked almost for free,
and the burden was simply too great.
When Boris was struck down with Covid
we hoped he would start to see sense,
but he thought that a pay rise for nurses
was rather a pointless expense.

Things eased slightly over the summer,
filling us all with some hope.
Shops open their doors, we met up indoors,
and hospitals started to cope.
Schools opened in early September,
and lots of us felt more relaxed.
Though testing was stretched to its limit,
and the system of tracing collapsed.

Disaster had not been averted,
and autumn was with us too soon.
We ran out of luck, and cases shot up,
prompting thoughts of our imminent doom.
A system of local restrictions
put Manchester in the top tier,
but despite the attempt to deny it,
the need for a lockdown was clear.

The reach of the virus is global
and it's clear there is no going back
It seems that it pays, to discard some old ways,
though our freedoms feel under attack.
We can't get together for parties
or travel the world on a whim.
Instead we are all wearing masks now,
and keeping away from the gym.

We all have our views on the future
and predictions of what it will be.
The question we ask: how long will it last?
Hints a vaccine will set us all free.
But it's clear that the jab won't be perfect –
it can't protect us 100%,

And we know we won't have it by Christmas,
most likely not even by Lent.

It's hard to be parted from loved ones
and sad we can no longer touch.
We want to have cuddles, beyond our close bubbles,
We're missing our families so much.
We've been forced to abandon our hobbies
and give up our socials and clubs.
Let's hope we can soon be united,
and show our affection with hugs.

Mass Observation Day May 12th 2020 by Tina Shaw

During the virus we have been keeping to our usual routines as far as possible. That means waking at 6.30am, tea in bed, followed by showers and breakfast. On a normal Tuesday, my husband would have gone off to the swimming pool, followed by my switching on Radio 4, then walking to the nearby tennis centre for two hours of indoor tennis with the over fifty-five group.

I sit down to make my morning email check on the computer—nothing of significance today. Then I practice my Hebrew reading for five minutes from a handout I collected from our Liberal Synagogue when it was possible to attend there, and then spend about forty-five minutes writing some more of my latest novel. I write for a hobby. I normally attend a local writing group and have sent off my two previous works, with no success. After that, I need a break from sitting at the computer and as *The Guardian* has arrived, I spend about an hour reading it in our conservatory with my morning cup of decaffeinated, black coffee.

Then it's back to the computer. I have been taking some online training from HACRO (Herts Assoc for Care & Resettlement of Offenders) as I am a volunteer in the Play Area at the local prison. However, today I have decided to sign up for MindEd information courses, as I would normally be volunteering in my local Primary School where I am also a governor. It takes me so long to register that I decide to leave the actual courses for another day.

It will soon be time for our 12 noon snack lunch. My husband was diagnosed as pre-diabetic last year and has asked me to make him soup once a week. He is definitely not overweight but has a family history of diabetes and, as I enjoy cooking, this is no problem. I chop up vegetables and boil them up with some stock cubes and whizz it all up in the mixer.

After lunch we read for a bit. I usually read modern novels from the library (currently closed) but have been using the lockdown to raid our extensive home bookshelves, choosing from re-reading classics, and trying out different genres. I had heard bad reports of *The Da Vinci Code* but I have found it quite readable, although I shall be glad when I have finished it.

Next, we go out for our daily walk. The weather has been good. We live near the Green Belt, and we are members of a walking group so this is no hardship. We have been averaging five miles each day and can now officially spend longer outdoors, although we were doing it anyway. On return, it's tea and a piece of the home-made cake that I make each week. I then do a second check of my emails, followed by sitting in the kitchen preparing the evening meal and listening to the pm news programme on Radio 4. It incorporates the daily Covid briefing which is becoming repetitive but today includes lots of queries following Boris Johnson's TV broadcast on Sunday, which has raised more questions than it has answered.

Following our 6pm evening meal and clear up, I spend time working on a 1000-piece jigsaw that I have borrowed from a neighbour. This is my third jigsaw during lockdown. I usually only complete one a year over the Christmas period. My other activity has been tinkering on our old upright piano, which I usually only bother with during the long summer

holidays. I learnt the basics as a child but can only produce a simple tune which keeps me amused for no more than half an hour.

We watch some TV, EastEnders soap and an episode of a six-part play called *The A Word* for me, whilst my husband goes into his study to watch some alternative programmes. Both our adult children phone during the evening. I arrange a socially distanced walk with my daughter for tomorrow—a new activity which we are now allowed to do. To our amazement our son suggests that we come over at the weekend and sit in their front garden for a chat, and also take a walk with him. He has been very strict about keeping to the lockdown rules, so this is quite a pleasant surprise and will enable us to see our teenage grandchildren, other than on Zoom, which will be lovely.

I am missing my sport (tennis & badminton) and walking with our friends. I am also missing my volunteering roles which make me feel I am still able to contribute to society. I am slightly afraid that by the time I am allowed back into these roles, I will have adjusted too well to a more limited lifestyle and become old.

I am most looking forward to having a haircut!

Self Portrait:

I am seventy-seven years old, a retired social worker, and live in a Hertfordshire town within easy reach of London. I have been married for fifty-three years and we have two adult children living nearby.

I donate my 12th May diary to the Mass Observation Archive. I consent to it being made publicly available as part of the Archive and assign my copyright in the diary to the Mass Observation Archive Trustees so that it can be reproduced in full or in part on websites, in publications and in broadcasts approved by the Mass Observation Trustees. I agree to the Mass Observation Archive assuming the role of Data Controller and the Archive will be responsible for the collection and processing of personal data and ensuring that such data complies with the DPA.

Love Between Lockdowns by Barbara Kuessner Hughes

I heard their voices before I saw them.

“Man, she’s peng!”

“Yeah, well peng!”

“She looks like one of them supermodels, innit!”

I was on my way to work several months ago, during the first lockdown, and sitting near the door of the Number Twelve bus in order to get some pseudo-fresh air. The boys were in the seats across the aisle, loud, unselfconscious, and speaking in the amalgamated London youth accent which cuts across colour and class. Their eyes were fixed on the statuesque young woman, probably Somali, who was striding onto the bus. Considering that we couldn’t see much of her, that her hair and body were draped in fabric and half of her face was covered, her beauty was penetrating, her eyes like cinnamon jewels.

The boys were about fifteen and dressed in almost identical jeans and trainers. The russet-skinned one with designs etched into his short afro leant over and muttered, “Eh, Micky...” into the ear of his mate, whose face, the colour of unbaked pastry, was turning ruddy. Fascinated, they observed as the newcomer took her seat, tranquilly indifferent to her surroundings. There was another murmur, and Micky’s large turquoise eyes seemed likely to pop.

“Eh, Marlon!” he responded. I couldn’t tell whether he was ecstatic or shocked. I looked at them, and Marlon’s eyes dipped, embarrassed. He jerked his Spiderman-bedecked chin in my direction.

“Sorry, miss. No disrespect. We was only saying she’s really pretty, yeah?” There was a hint of the Caribbean in his voice. I pictured a firm, bible-quoting grandma in his background.

I smiled beneath my mask, but then my attention was ripped away from the boys by the spectacle of Trafalgar Square. Its science fiction emptiness was breath-taking. The lions loomed, subdued, their colour seeming several shades grimmer than before. Even the few lonely pigeons seem disorientated. A solitary man clutching a camera and craning his neck seemed about to fall backwards, overawed by the emptiness of the vistas. Never again, he was probably thinking, would he be able to photograph one of the most famous landmarks in the world without a single human being impeding his view. And yet, judging by his body language, he didn’t find this fact an unambiguous cause for celebration. He was probably processing how much human beings are needed to create atmosphere in a manmade environment.

“Man, look at that!” Marlon exclaimed. “Weird, innit, Micky?”

Micky was staring out of the window. “Where’ve you man gone?” he asked, his tone one of wonder.

“Hiding from the virus.”

The boys fell silent.

On that day, although London had been largely immobilised, I still had a job. Only a week later, I was going to be made redundant and have a deep, dark pool of unease opened beneath me. Now, I feel its edges lap and swirl around me wherever I venture, and every twitch of the water carries the threat of panic within it. My nights are no longer really nights; I spend half the time awake. And my days are not fully daytime: there are too many shadows and nagging, disquieting thoughts. On the one hand, I can't afford to think more than five minutes ahead of the moment I'm in for fear of losing my composure. On the other, I have to muster my resources and force myself into a future which seems likely not to want me in it. Anxiety never played much part in my life previously, but now it's inside me all the time. I'm young and healthy enough not to be particularly worried about catching Coronavirus, but I am worried about unemployment and penury. The same thought circles me constantly, like an eagle watching prey: where am I going to find another job, when millions of other people are looking as well?

Now, months later, with the first lockdown over and another one being threatened, another vast, smothering sack being lowered over society for reasons which I understand and accept but dread, the bus journey which I'm on is a treat, an indulgence. I've never managed to accumulate much in the way of savings; living in London is so expensive, and I haven't got a family to act as a safety net. I've cut everything back to the bare bones, putting money in envelopes the way my granny might have done: this envelope for electricity, this one for the week's food. I make shopping lists: potatoes, lentils, vegetables to stew. A pack of eggs.

Ever since we agreed that I was going to visit you for the weekend, my darling, my anticipation has been the only thing propelling me through the days: in discouraged moments, I picture myself kissing the nape of your neck where the last of your little dark curls peter out and the skin is silky. I picture myself stroking the crisp dark hair on your chest. My desire for you is one of the only cures for my malaise. I haven't seen you in person, haven't felt your flesh or body heat in months. Sometimes when I'm lying on my bed, my limbs literally ache for yours. I simply need to see you, and the fact that we've both had negative Covid test results seems a justification.

There's no-one sitting near me on this journey today, no entertaining Micky or Marlon, which is exactly what's making me remember them. The only two other passengers on the bus are seated behind me. I saw them as I boarded, their eyes small pits of anguish above their masks. I wish I hadn't noticed them.

Back on that other day, the months between then and now turned into mush by monotony, the bus bore Marlon, Micky and me through that London of affluence and imposing architecture, every rooftop an elaborate confection, every façade an unabashed statement of wealth and confidence, and I fantasised that I was a tourist who'd crossed the globe simply to enjoy these sights. At the end of the day the smart London which I've never managed to infiltrate for more than a couple of hours at a time would welcome me in, and I'd return to a luxurious hotel with flower boxes outside its entrance. The doorman would enquire whether Madam had had a good day, and I'd take tea in a burnished light.

"It's well nice round here," Marlon commented.

“Yeah,” Micky agreed. The Somali supermodel seemed to have been forgotten. “You can see the buildings proper like for once.” And then we were crossing the river, observing silver scratches spread across the obsidian surface of the water. The atmosphere was misty, and for a moment I longed for night-time, so that the thousands of lights from skyscrapers could dazzle me.

On the other side of the river, we began to penetrate a different world. Apart from pockets of tucked-away wealth, our surroundings became progressively less rich and less classically English: the world I lived in when I first moved to London and my Aussie flatmate Martine and I bounced from one shared flat to another, trying to escape problematic landlords: the Slovakian adulterer who lived on the premises and whose absent wife and mistress would both bombard him with phone calls in the middle of the night. The out-of-work Scottish actress with hysterical tendencies, who turned every minor domestic glitch into a nerve-jangling catastrophe. The Sicilian voyeur who’d drop in uninvited, try to listen in on conversations and finger our mail in the hallway. The only benefit of this itinerant way of life had been that I’d come to know a swathe of different neighbourhoods.

That day, Marlon, Micky and I spent what felt like ten minutes waiting for the bus to free itself from a jam, long enough to absorb the details around us: overflowing bins, boarded-up windows, obscene graffiti, dispossessed people with sleeping bags and crazed hair glazedly gazing into space, a mangy-looking dog appearing to frown at the bus.

“Man,” Micky remarked sadly. “This is a dump, innit. I reckon I’d top myself if I had to live here.”

“Ssh,” Marlon scolded. “Hush your mouth! My grandma, she says suicide’s a sin.”

“Reckon? Why is it? Who says it is, ’part from your granny?”

“God says, of course!”

“But what if you don’t believe in God? I don’t believe in God.”

“Wash your mouth out with soap, man! How can you talk like that?!”

There was something sweet about Marlon’s outrage. But I didn’t blame Micky for his sentiments. Not after recent events.

Once again, my thoughts returned to you, my love. After years of disappointments and disillusionment, I truly believe that I’ve found a man who’s genuine. Honest almost to the point of brutality. It’s like they say in the songs: you’re the one I’ve been waiting for. You know you’re in love when all the lyrics seem to have been written for you.

“My grandma says, pray to God, and He shall show you the way,” Marlon said with fervency in his voice.

“My granny don’t say nothing like that. She says things like, ‘Turn up the sodding volume, can’t hear it, who ate that last bit of swiss roll I was keeping, and where’d I leave my bloomin’ fags?’” Micky said, in a passable impersonation of an irritable seventy-year-old woman. His rather stodgy-looking exterior was turning out to contain considerable acting skills.

The bus still wasn't moving, and the boys fell silent, possibly downcast by the neighbourhood. Which got me thinking about the many different parts of the city in which I'd lived. In one, I acquired the habit of eating ackee and saltfish in a Jamaican café nearly every weekend. In another, the owner of the local kebab shop persuaded himself that I fancied him and flirted so heavily in broken Turkish-inflected English that I switched my allegiance to curries. In another area I learned to appreciate multi-layered gateaux which bore cultural traces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and in yet another, I took salsa lessons from an extremely hot Cuban dance instructor and his Colombian colleague. I'd often missed those worlds of fried chicken shops and bustling markets selling Asian and African textiles and foodstuffs which I couldn't put a name to. The neighbourhood where I live now is mainly Irish and Jewish, and although it has a vibrancy of its own, it doesn't allow me the pleasure of imagining that I've landed in some tropical place on the other side of the world.

Now I'm noticing more and more boarded-up shops and the shredded dreams they represent, so I resort to my usual selfish distraction technique. I imagine you taking off your shirt. There is no way of knowing how long this happiness will last. I don't take it for granted. The bus rumbles onwards, and I wonder what has been going on in Marlon and Micky's lives since that day when I saw them. I hope Covid hasn't damaged their families, hasn't lessened their youthful exuberance. And I find myself thinking yet again about how so much in life hinges on coincidence. If I hadn't gone into The Lady and Mirror pub that night a year ago, it's unlikely that I would ever have met you.

You apologised for accosting me, as you put it. "I *had* to speak to you. I can't explain it: I *had* to. I had to say *something*. I couldn't just let you get away." And I understood, because as we drank that first beer together, crammed into a pub booth with ripped-up seating, I was imagining how our bodies would fit together. My soul was realigning itself towards you.

The following week, we met again, and the week after that, I went home with you.

A year later, we're still together. We celebrated the end of the first lockdown by going to a show at the Hayward Gallery. It was a strange exercise, being counted in and negotiating the space with a bunch of other people who weren't used to the new conventions either. It was a dance with ill-defined steps, and some people were more gracious at improvising than others. We dodged our way around each other and around the artworks, which were about trees and their importance to human beings and the planet. I was taking in a table-sized scene of the smouldering ruins of a forest fire in miniature when I looked up, and there you were: my tall black-haired bandit in a red bandanna. You said something, but the material muffled your words. You tried again, more loudly.

"This tableau is rather appropriately post-apocalyptic, wouldn't you say?" You mimicked the pompous tones of a television presenter whom we've often mocked whilst eating toast and soup together. I agreed.

We wove our way around the rest of the exhibition together, examining photographs of a mangrove swamp in Malaysia and paintings of murky Brothers Grimm-style forests, and as always, our movements were seamless, choreographed by the feelings which hold us together.

After the exhibition we strolled along the banks of the Thames, discombobulated by having them almost to ourselves, and bought coffee at an open-air stall, feeling a chilly breeze sting our faces.

“Well,” you said, removing your mask to sip your cappuccino, and the revelatory gesture was surprisingly erotic. I like the lower part of your face as much as I like your eyes and hair. You have what my mother would have called a *kind* mouth: nothing pinched about the lips. An innocence about their fullness, like a child’s, good teeth, a pleasing smile. And your personality has worked its way under my skin, as well: boyish enthusiasm, affability until your tolerance is tested. You can be testy when you disagree. But I relish our occasional disagreements. They’re an indicator of warm feelings.

We’ve been discussing the project of eventually moving in together, the dream of having a family, and I can’t wait for the two days which lie ahead: a whole weekend of lying in one another’s arms, of tumbling over one another, with maybe a meal or a walk in Dulwich Park to dispel the haze. I’m certain that no matter how much time may maul us, I’ll still love you if we live to grow old.

The bus has nearly reached the road where Marlon and Micky got off that day. I was sorry to see them go. “Bye, miss,” Marlon called out to me, and I waved. They were nice boys, and I’d enjoyed their accidental company.

If I don’t get offloaded by the bus stopping without warning on some unfamiliar corner, and everybody being ordered off to wait for the next one, something which happened to me frequently when I lived in these parts, I’ll arrive at the stop on your road in fifteen minutes. Or less, since there’s so little traffic, and we’re gliding through the city as though it’s our private driveway.

There it will be, your little house at the end of the row of Victorian workmen’s cottages. It’ll be dark by the time I arrive, streetlamps throwing shadows, the road empty apart from an occasional sole stroller intent on maintaining routine in the face of strangeness. I picture the ghosts of chimney sweeps and market traders stumbling about between the parked cars, not comprehending their presence.

I’ll ring the bell and you’ll fill up the doorway. “Welcome, highwaywoman!” you’ll probably say. Tooth-achingly corny, not even funny, but I won’t mind. Love the man, put up with his humour. Or you may say nothing at all. You may merely pull me against your large warm body and nuzzle my neck, and no other communication will be needed.

Barnard Castle Eye Test by Rebecca Nesbit

The advice was made clear to the country:
stay at home for the virus can kill.
Only leave if your journey's essential,
and definitely not if you're ill.

His first offence happened in London
when he went home to see his sick wife,
then later returned to the office,
against his own boss's advice.

He feared that his wife may have COVID,
and be too ill to care for their son.
So, the family travelled to Durham
to stay on the farm with his mum.

Morag and Robert, his parents,
own an expansive estate.
So, Dominic stayed in a cottage,
where his sis could leave food at the gate.

The next day he woke with a headache,
and went on to feel pretty ill.
His symptoms all fitted with COVID,
including a "serious" chill.

His son's symptoms started to worsen,
so they took some professional advice.
An ambulance came to collect him,
and he travelled with Dominic's wife.

The hospital quickly discharged him
– they left there the following day.
Dominic came to collect them,
but fever should've kept him away.

The three of them soon felt much better,
and they went for a walk in the woods,
though guidance had changed to prevent this,
as I'm sure that he well understood.

They had a day out at a castle,
to check that his eyesight was fine.

It just happened to be his wife's birthday,
and they happened to have a good time.

During their time at the castle,
no distancing rules had been breached,
but the fact that he shouldn't have been there
was confirmed by the Durham police.

The reason he gave for his journey
(that the virus affected his eyes)
means that he broke traffic guidance,
if he feared he was unfit to drive.

So the breaches appear to be varied,
though he insists he has broken no laws.
Boris seemed keen to forgive him,
and his past sheds some light on the cause.

Mr Cummings' connection to Boris
goes back a pretty long way.
The Spectator employed them together,
before he became Johnson's aide.

His wife's father owns Chillingham Castle
– such connections can't do any harm.
His uncle owned Europe's worst nightclub.
And he owns shares in his father's huge farm.

Britain's departure from Europe
was helped by campaign group Vote Leave.
Of course, it was Cummings who led it,
with some dubious tricks up his sleeve.

His farm receives funding from Europe,
a figure so huge it won't scan,
but the details aren't core to this poem,
it just gives you a sense of the man.

So what's the result of this saga,
in which Cummings avoided the sack?
Have voters gone on to forgive him,
or will trust prove hard to win back?

Coronaville – Episode One by Jane Fookes

Available as a Podcast at <https://shows.acast.com/coronaville>

NARRATOR: This is Dolphin Street. A street eerily silent. A street waiting for news. A street coming to terms with this most unfamiliar of new realities. Oh, and there's Marcia Gibson out on her front lawn, glass in hand at this highly "previous" hour in the morning, looking out for the Ocado van while showing off generous portions of her anatomy in what purports to be a nightdress. She toasts the postman, who sticks rigidly to the opposite side of the road ever since that humiliating incident last week.

MARCIA GIBSON: Well, we're not eating grass yet, are we darling?

NARRATOR: A tinkle of knowing laughter escapes her as she gloats over the garage full of pinot, merlot and cabernet, as well as the few cases of fruit-flavoured gins for those especially tiresome days ahead. Delicious "empty" calories, all completely fat-free, and providing at least two of her 5-a-day, surely. She's a girl with her head screwed on, if she says so herself. She doesn't notice little Orca Bradley riding his bike down the centre of the road. His mummy always tells him she had a "whale of a time" giving birth to him, which he's still a little too young to quite understand. One day though, he'll discover irony and his world will become just a little more chipped around the edges. But for now, he's simply enjoying the empty roads on what should have been a school day, wearing his sister's swimming goggles and an improvised face mask made up of three scarves stretched across his face. So uppermost are his parents' infection-control strategies that they have forgotten all about the boy's itchy, sweaty cycling helmet hanging on the back of the door. All this good fortune, Orca puts down to the awesome power of his lucky underpants which he has decided to wear on a permanent basis for at least the next few weeks.

ORCA BRADLEY: Hello Gerald.

NARRATOR: He trills.

GERALD CARDEW: It's Mr Cardew to you, sonny Jim.

NARRATOR: That's Gerald, and most certainly not Gerry. He's taking his first constitutional of the day. One of the happy outcomes of this plague-ridden time, to his mind, is the sudden and most welcome absence of all this blasted hugging and kissing people go in for nowadays.

GERALD CARDEW: You're introduced to the friend of a friend and before you know it, she's hanging round your neck leaving her ghastly perfume on you for the rest of the day.

NARRATOR: For Gerald there is nothing so terrifying as a member of the female persuasion, old enough to know better, in heat and bearing down on him at speed. It's a nightmare from which he wakes often. He's level with Marcia now and decides to really put the boot in.

GERALD CARDEW: Put some wretched clothes on woman, you look an absolute disgrace.

NARRATOR: And thus, he distances himself irrevocably from yet another source of unwanted embrace. A breeze is starting to make itself felt on this promising Monday in mid-March. *This will dry in no time*, thinks Deirdre Penhaligon. She's pegging out the church linens she's been soaking in the bath overnight and realises with a little skip of relief that she won't be doing this again for quite some while. Now she understands why no one else volunteered for the job. It's very odd though that the church should shut up shop like this in a time of such emergency. What sort of message does that give? She's not even allowed to retrieve the gloves she stupidly left by the font after matins yesterday. She doesn't believe anyone would catch that horrid virus in a church in the middle of a service. God just wouldn't allow it. She knows he wouldn't. So why doesn't the vicar know that, and the bishop, and the Archbishop? Where the hell is their faith? For a moment she's assaulted by a blinding beam of light from above and seriously considers taking it as a sign until she remembers it's the reflective brilliance of the tinfoil her neighbour Nigel has applied to all his windowpanes. Poor spaced-out Nigel, lurid conspiracy theorist Nigel, up to his old tricks again now there's something really globally gruesome to set his stressed-out brain cells working on. And make no mistake, this is the Big One, the event he's been waiting for ever since he was sent down from Cambridge in the '70s for being too weird. SARS and avian flu were just the warm-up. He's tried phoning Porton Down so often the police have had to get involved. But what Nigel, who withholds his surname on security grounds, is sure of, is that this outbreak is no accident.

NIGEL: I mean come on man, a virus that only does for the frail and elderly, right? Coming out of Wuhan, yeah? Just when China's ageing population is about to become a problem? You're not telling me that's a coincidence. All planned, you see, decades ago. I know these things. Screw the world economy, then buy us up body and soul. Be speaking Chinese before the year is out.

NARRATOR: But no one listens to Nigel. They never do. And he lights another spliff to console himself. At number 17, the alarm clocks went off three hours ago, but the Jacksons are still in bed. Separate beds. Separate bedrooms. The week before last they let it be known, as plausibly as they knew how, that they had "succumbed" and would be "self-isolating" for two weeks. Two weeks far away from all those unreasonable demands at the office. Two weeks of luscious, if not downright filthy, self-indulgence. And two whole glorious weeks freed from the prying eyes and meddlesome manners of that monstrous busybody Arlene Michaels next door. Yes, two entire weeks without her barging in, popping round or calling through the letterbox. What a whopping, all-encompassing wheeze this was going to be. But two achingly beautiful weeks turned rather quickly into two interminable, soul-destroying eons with only themselves for company, picking away at each other's faults until they bled. And Arlene's retro cookware building up unheeded on their doorstep filled, they had no doubt, with some working-class abomination or another. Now neither of them is willing to take the first conciliatory step, even if it means staying in bed all day. So, when a knock at the door sounds, they both silently tell Arlene what she can do to herself. The shattering sound of

their front door giving way has a somewhat different affect, and the heavy boots powering up the stairs really get their attention.

PC MIKE BURNS: One of them's in here. Are you all right, sir? Your neighbour was worried about you. Why didn't you answer the door?

NARRATOR: As for Arlene, who's had her long-cherished trip to New Zealand to see her newest grandchild cancelled, she wishes she could decamp to Ambridge—the only place in Britain seemingly unaware of the coronavirus pandemic. It's hot enough today to actually skimp on clothing and Ursula Schoenhausen is doing just that, down to her undies in fact, in the miniature suntrap that is her courtyard garden. She's catching up with the Woman's Hour podcast while pressing Peter's work pants and has just come across a very curious fact. Pasta—you remember pasta, don't you, disappeared off to God knows where a few weeks ago along with all the loo rolls—well, it seems pasta is still to be had if you're not too fussy where you go to get it.

URSULA SCHOENHAUSEN: Pasta from Anne Summers? What? Oh, I see, penis-shaped pasta. Eugh! These Brits, whatever next.

NARRATOR: Binky Cadwallader calls to her from his balcony up in the eaves of the nursing home on Acorn Avenue. She hasn't seen this one before.

BINKY CADWALLADER: I say, this handwashing business, we'll all be ruddy OCD by the time this is over. Never known anything like it. Extraordinary.

NARRATOR: Ursula wonders how long he's been there.

BINKY CADWALLADER: Good to see a young healthy woman, such as yourself, enjoying the sun. Not allowed out or I'd be over there like a shot to keep you company.

NARRATOR: She ignores him. Engage in conversation and she'll never hear the end of it.

BINKY CADWALLADER: Keep your pecker up, that's what I say, and enjoy yourself. Might as well, we'll be paying through the nose for all this Coroner Disease. Won't get me of course, I might be 97 but there's life in the old dog yet.

NARRATOR: Orca Bradley holds up a particularly wiggly worm and sees how far it will stretch. He has been digging them up in the garden as part of a spurious biology lesson instigated by his daddy, Simon. It has fallen to Simon to educate the 5-year-old since the schools closed last week, and it's already proving exhausting. Orca simply burns through the activities Simon comes up with, leaving hours still to fill. How do these teachers do it? And now they'll have to go through the aggravating routine of singing 'Happy bloody Birthday' TWICE while the little poppet washes his hands. Oh, to possess the copyright to that bit of doggerel. Think of the tidal wash of cash coming in. He'd be able to employ a tutor or send Orca to a jolly good school abroad. Or better still buy himself his very own one-man desert island thousands upon thousands of miles away from the word "Why".

We're outside number 69 Dolphin Street. A number with no significance whatsoever you naughty boy, as Brian Littlejohn likes to say far too often. He does lay it on a bit thick, but big blousy Brian is a joy to all who know him. Everyone agrees. Everyone that is but Rob over-the-road Jones. He'd like to take a big pointy pin and deflate the over-blown windbag once and for all.

ROB JONES: Gays shouldn't have to ingratiate themselves like that anymore.

NARRATOR: He says passionately into the bathroom mirror.

ROB JONES: I should have the cour... No, God what am I saying? No, *they* should have the courage to shout, *This is who I am, I'm out, I'm proud and nuts to the lot of you.* I'd die before I sucked up to all these homophobic old fossils around here.

NARRATOR: And he cries actual tears. What's happening to him? His girlfriend Crystal can't understand why he's been so upset ever since Brian took in sweet little Jamie, a nurse whose landlord evicted him because he might get COVID-19. The two of them are just so delightful together. Crystal has been furloughed, which isn't as painful as it sounds. Eighty percent of her salary, courtesy of the government, to stay home doing nothing. Result. She's about to start writing her smash-hit blockbuster romance about how she and Rob first met, how she helped him find the courage to ask her out, how that terrible row in Clacton made them stronger, and how their future is sealed now they're expecting their first adorable little babykins. She'll get Rob to take a picture of her posed and poised at her laptop to share with the waiting world—Crystal Cannington, writer of superlative fiction.

Oh, mind yourselves, there goes king of the road Kevin Dobson in his Vauxhall Vivaro delivery van. He's been thrashing that thing for two weeks, now the roads are so empty. He got 72.5 mph out of it up the high street yesterday. What used to take most of the day he gets done in only a few hours, particularly as he doesn't have to carry heavy items indoors anymore. Cor, he used to get some rows off the old biddies for that in the beginning. He even featured on the front cover of the Gazette with the headline: *Is this the most uncaring man in Britain?* All changed now of course. He had a disinfectant squeezy bottle aimed at him the other day when he got too close.

It's eleven o'clock in the morning and poor old Norman Daly stands outside his favourite café, scratching forlornly at the window. What he wouldn't do for a proper barista cup of coffee and a sit down with the paper. He's lost in this new landscape. It's a ghost town out here. He's still perturbed by an item on the radio this morning: *Is it worth flushing the entire economy down the toilet with this nationwide lockdown simply in order to save older members of the population who are already vulnerable?*

NORMAN DALY: Good God, has it come to this? It'll be extermination camps next. Why did we bother to defeat Hitler?

Turkey delight? by Suzanne Stanton

Tom the turkey ran towards the turkey shed gobbling wildly. He ran up the wooden ramp and announced “Tom was right! We’re all for the chop!” He slid a wing across his red featherless neck “The lorry comes for us tomorrow.”

“We’re all going to be killed?” cackled Little Tom.

“Humans eat us?” asked Curious Tom.

Big Tom looked down at them from his perch and shook his feathers “Yes. The dog woofed me that yesterday.”

“What shall we do?”

Ninety-nine pairs of eyes watched him helplessly.

“I have an idea.” Big Tom always gobbled slow and low. “It’s crazy but it’s possible.”

The “Toms” gathered round.

“The lorry is going to come here tomorrow for a hundred turkeys, but what if there are no turkeys?”

“You mean leave?” cackled Adventurous Tom.

“How do we do that?” piped up Worried Tom “We can’t fly.”

“We disguise ourselves..... as chickens.”

Ninety-nine turkeys fell on their backs cackling, gobbling and hissing with laughter.

“Chickens? How can a turkey lower itself to be a chicken!” gobbled Snobby Tom.

“Surely,” Big Tom hissed, “it’s better to be a live chicken than a dead turkey.”

Silence fell in the shed.

“So, this is the plan. Little Tom and Shy Tom, I want you both to go and study the chickens. How do they move? Eat? Et cetera. We need to know it all. Worried Tom, you have to ask the dog to find us a tin of brown paint.”

“Boisterous Tom, you need to choose five other Toms to help you make a dip in the soil deep enough for the biggest Tom.”

“And the rest of us?” asked Inquisitive Tom. “What shall we do?”

“The rest of us have to form a circle and pluck out each other’s tail feathers. Our butts are too big to be chickens.”

“That’s going to hurt,” gobbled Cautious Tom.

“Not as much as having your throat cut,” hissed Academic Tom.

“What shall we do with the feathers we pluck out?” cackled Reluctant Tom.

“We need to keep them in here. We’ll need them later. Now get to work.”

The turkeys did as they were asked and, later that night when the lights had gone out in the human shed, the turkeys met up again.

“Ok, this is the plan. Firstly, we empty the paint into the hole. Then we submerge ourselves in it one by one. Next, while the paint is still wet, we roll in this pile of feathers, being careful to cover our bare necks. Lastly, we need to flip our snoods back over our heads to resemble a wattle. Clear?”

Ninety-nine turkeys nodded.

“We then begin our lessons in how to be a chicken. We need to learn to peck and scratch like they do. Little and Shy Tom will demonstrate. We are almost home and dry now Toms. Come on! Let’s do this!”

“We can do this!” gobbled the turkeys.

They quickly formed an orderly queue in front of the brown puddle.

“Well, ain’t this a surprise,” said Mrs Turkey Farmer early next morning.

“It’s a miracle, wife, that’s what it is.”

“A miracle? But we ain’t got no turkeys, husband. What we gonna do? How we gonna pay our bills?”

They leaned on the wooden fence and watched as the chickens scratched and pecked in front of them.

“The God-damndest thing is, wife, that was Bob on the phone just now. Turns out supermarkets don’t want no big birds this year. Covid means folks can’t have no-one round for Christmas dinner, so they all want little birds. Chickens to be precise.

“I said Bob I said, you send that God-damn lorry round to my door. I have one hundred chickens alive and scratching. Just don’t ask me how. It’s a God-damn miracle, that’s what it is.”

“So, the slaughter lorry is still coming?”

“Yes wife. It is. To collect our birds!”

One hundred chickens looked at each other and gobbled.

Volunteering in the Pandemic by Tina Shaw

Numerous media reports have praised the benefits of volunteering during these difficult last few months. It is good for our mental wellbeing and contributes to the wellbeing and coming together of society. I would not for one minute wish to take issue with this, but...there is always a *but*.

As a seventy-seven-year-old I am, like many U3A members, classed as in the vulnerable group. Whilst I have personally, luckily, not been required to shield, many volunteers will have come into this category, thus no volunteering.

Before lockdown, I was undertaking four volunteering roles, all connected to children. Only one has been able to take place. I am a school governor, and that role has continued on a virtual basis, although school visits were not a possibility until very recently. As a volunteer in the classroom, I have not been allowed into the school. Apparently, no local schools are currently permitting volunteers in despite government guidelines allowing this. I am also a volunteer with NSPCC school's service. Sadly, at present, this service has had to be put on hold as schools are not permitted to have assemblies. The NSPCC has been excellent at keeping in touch virtually, which is some consolation, but I doubt whether this role will restart until at least after Easter. My other volunteering role was to help supervise children who were visiting a parent in prison. Prison visits were initially totally curtailed and are now only taking place on a very limited basis. Does this matter? There is clear evidence that those prisoners with good family links are less likely to re-offend when they are released, so yes, it matters. Sadly, I have had no contact from this organisation since lockdown.

Being valued as a volunteer is part of what makes it worthwhile. Retaining our interest and commitment for the post lockdown world comes with the organisation making the effort to keep in contact with us, even if we can't actively complete our roles in the present. Many organisations are going to struggle to re-engage their volunteers when the world returns to a semblance of normality, unless they maintain a minimum level of contact. Let's hope it won't be too long before we can play our part in society once again.

Tribute to Success by Judith Foster

Let me figure in words and rhymes
What Covid means to me.
A baffling sign in troubled times
Spreads its alarming potency
And problems still to be.

That beautiful, small planet,
Gaudy in carnival hues,
With aliens sprouting from it,
Hatches an ill that accrues
An exponential fuse.

Humility, humanity,
Would better suit your state
Than squawking your inanity
In poisoned, rabid debate;
Better confront your fate.

Oh, creature at the pinnacle
Of evolution, snug,
Arrogant, able to tackle
These mighty matters with a shrug,
Topped by a bug?

Come, now, saved by your scientists,
Damned by petty politics,
Now, on your way, progress enlists
A little modesty to fix
A future void of tricks.

The Legend of Rainy Valley by Ben Bergonzi

An old house stood in a rainy valley. A good number of people lived in the house: no-one knew quite how many, but there were a lot of families, old people, poor people living several together in damp basements, rich people living in the best rooms with expensive iron locks on the doors. Every five years these families chose a First Father who had to make decisions about how things were run, and to take charge of the Community Piggy Bank.

This was a very old house as I say, and the roof leaked, and the floor joists tended to rot. Each winter the damp would run down the walls, and the old people would cough and sneeze. There was never enough money in the Piggy Bank to mend the roof properly, but the people who lived in the house did not mind too much because however anxious they might be in the winter months, sure enough every year spring came and the rains subsided, the walls dried out, and everyone felt much, much better.

There were some handymen who had the job of patching up the leaks and trying to keep the house in shape. Over the last few years, the people who had been the First Mother or Father of the community had often said, “We must save money. We don’t need *so many* handymen, they only need to *work smarter*. After all, this is a well-built house with a proud heritage. If we can just balance the books, then everything will be all right.”

So, some of the handymen were told their pay was being cut, and some were told to find other jobs. Most of the people who lived in the house thought this was a good idea because it would mean they could have more of their money to spend on themselves, instead of paying it into the Piggy Bank.

But there was one year when the rain did not stop in the spring. It went on, heavier than ever. The First Father of the house got together with a wise man and a wizard and the three of them stood together in a row behind lecterns, and gave speeches. They told all the house-dwellers the situation was very serious, indeed unprecedented, because of the weather coming in through the roof, and that they must keep out of the rooms where the leaks were the worst, and not gather together in groups because the floorboards were too weak. What the First Father told the people was first called *Advice*, and then it was called *Guidelines*, and then finally he called it *The Rules* and said everyone *must* obey.

Meanwhile, there were a few handymen up on the roof with hammers and rusty nails trying to mend the leaks with bits of old tarpaulin. Inside the house, in the finest rooms, some friends of the First Father were sitting with abacuses and reels of string, and they said they could solve all the problems by connecting people together with string and tracking wherever they went in the house. The First Father said his friends were very clever to think of this and went to the Piggy Bank and paid them very well for their abacuses and reels of string: far more than he was paying the handymen with their old hammers and rusty nails.

The months went by and there was no improvement to the unprecedented levels of damp. The First Father kept changing *The Rules* without warning. If anyone complained, he said he had to *Follow the Wizardry*. The people who lived in the house became impatient at

being told they could not go and see their friends and relations. Some of them became very cross and said, “Where are these leaks? It’s only a bit of damp, like every year.”

But then another group of people said, “But if we don’t follow the Rules, the handymen will be overwhelmed.”

Eventually, the First Father had an idea, and borrowed a lot more from the other houses in other valleys. He said he could solve all the problems if the people in the house all had their own umbrellas. Then it would not matter if there were not enough handymen looking after the roof because everyone could keep themselves dry. There was only one man in the house who could make umbrellas and however much money he was offered he said, “I don’t want to be the richest man in the cemetery, thank you very much.” So, it took him a very long time to make an umbrella for everyone.

He started with the oldest people in the house, and they were pleased to have their umbrellas and to be dry. But still, they did not dare move about. They said to each other, “Until everyone has their umbrella it is just not safe.”

Another year went by, while the umbrella man worked flat out to give everyone their own umbrella, and all that time he was paid about the same as the average handyman, and much less than the people in charge of the abacuses and the reels of string.

The day came when the First Father said, “Now we are free of leaks and damp and we are all safe with our own umbrellas.”

But the next winter there came a wind so strong it forced its way through all the doors and windows, and blew the rain in under the umbrellas, and everyone started to get just as wet as they were before. Some people called it a new variant of rain.

But strange to say, this time most of the house-dwellers were not so worried. There was no more talk of *Rules*, or even *Guidelines*. The people just got on with their lives. Eventually the rain eased off, but most people forgot to notice.

And then, as far as I know, they all lived happily ever after.

Happy that is, but very poor.

Just Because by Tina Shaw

Just because I'm seventy
Should my life be empty?
Just because I'm seventy one,
Must I stop having fun?
Just because I'm seventy two,
Am I cancelled too?
Just because I'm seventy three,
Is it over for me?
Just because I'm seventy four,
No one comes to my door.
Just because I'm seventy five,
Will I stay alive?
Just because I'm seventy six,
I am in a fix.
Just because I'm seventy seven,
Am I facing heaven?
Just because I'm seventy eight,
Shall I just sit and wait?
Just because I'm seventy nine,
Have I had my time?
Just because I'm eighty,
It's all over matey!

Where There's Cake There's Hope by Yvonne Moxley

It all started with a bag of jam doughnuts. *OK, I can do this*, I thought, preparing for the sudden two-week lockdown that was imposed on us in March 2020 when all non-essential shops had to close. I bit into the first of six doughnuts, the jam running down past my wrist and onto my arm. "Mustn't waste the best bit," I said, licking off the jam. Two weeks was going to be a long time and I needed cheering up.

April, still in lockdown, heralded the season of chocolate in the form of eggs. I bravely munched my way through a number of them at my sweet shop, unable to bear the thought of all that chocolate turning white as the oil escaped during the hot weather that was to come. I admit that as I stuck my tongue into the gooey middle of a Cadbury's cream egg, I didn't know that we were going to have a hot summer, so call it inspiration from above if you like. It was, after all, Easter.

Nothing much changed in my world during the coming weeks, except that I had to stop listening to the news. The rest of the world was experiencing unimaginable suffering, so I tended to close myself off and concentrate on my little family, who I couldn't see, and my friends, who I also couldn't see. But it was June, my birthday, and I was given a three-tier birthday cake with which to celebrate. I could, of course, eke out the cake, freeze it, and eat a little at a time. Bulk buying? No room in the freezer? Oh well.

The subject of climate change was high on the agenda in July and August, so I was determined to do my bit for the world. *Don't Throw Away Food* was the motto. So I didn't. 'Nuff said.

August was the deadline for a non-fiction book I was writing entitled *A to Z of Windsor & Eton*. I love doing the research for these books, and I was reading up on the Middle Ages when Edward III was spending a fortune on Windsor Castle. It was the time of the Black Death, which affected thousands of people as it crept its way around Europe. Evidently the disease was transported through the air and via fleas and rats and was especially prevalent on ships, spreading the plague from port to port. In an effort to contain it, sailors could not disembark from their ships for thirty days (a trentino) which was later extended to forty days (a quarantine) which is where our word comes from.

All this research made me hungry, and I had to stop at this point. Sticky bits were falling amongst the keys on my keyboard, and they needed to be poked with a cotton-bud before they wormed their way further into the mechanics, or whatever magical things lurk inside my keyboard. *Bits* consisted of jumbo oats and desiccated coconut mixed with unsalted butter, caster sugar, ground almonds and golden syrup. Yes, you've guessed it—flapjacks. I made them all by myself and ate them all by myself, except, obviously, for the bits. (Might leave out the coconut next time.)

Back to the Black Death. Of course, there were no vaccinations available in those days, and while doctors were still prepared to risk their lives by visiting their patients, they

performed bloodletting and boil-lancing, or encouraged people to bathe in rosewater as a cure. Give me the rosewater any day.

By September, a friend of mine was able to get her hands on a bag of self-raising flour. Joy of joys. Victoria sponge—made in honour of the sovereign whom my next lot of research had now reached. Now I know that the proper way to make it is supposed to be with a simple spread of raspberry jam sandwiched between the two layers of sponge—seedless jam as one can't do with having crunchy seeds in a cake, but times were depressing and a pick-me-up in the form of butter-icing was an essential accompaniment to the jam. A sprinkling of caster sugar went over the top. Delish.

I belong to the Eton Society (for research, as I'm now on the second book about these two towns entitled *Secret Windsor & Eton*). The Society sent me part of a copy of a letter from Henry VIII written in September 1517 to Eton College complaining that Windsor Castle had become “grettly infeste wit this contagious plage,” blaming the spread of infection partly on beggars inside the Castle, and of others who had been conversing with infected occupants. He demanded those in authority at the College resolve the situation and enforce new regulations to combat the problem “as ye may be your discrete wisdomes shal think most convenient”. Looking back in time, it seems they were the first body in Britain to come up with a workable plague quarantine plan. As an added piece of info, Prime Minister Boris Johnson went to Eton College. “History doesn't repeat itself, but it very often rhymes,” wrote Mark Twain.

October and November came and went in a flurry of Christmas cake and Christmas pudding baking. Also, mincemeat for the mince pies to be made nearer to Christmas. Juicy raisins and sultanas from California, orange peel and candied fruit from Spain, cinnamon and other spices from Sri Lanka, soft brown sugar from Mauritius mixed with Jamaican rum. I could travel the world with just one bite. How I longed for a holiday—all our previous 2020 holiday bookings now transferred to 2021.

Now, I don't do injections. The last one I had was a triple something-or-other before going to Asia on holiday. The injection sent me colour blind for quite a few hours. Actually, it probably wasn't the injection itself, but more likely my nerves in the build-up to it. So I have pooh-poohed all inoculations since, even the flu jab which is free and which my doctor keeps reminding me as though the word *free* makes it sound enticing. That was until November when a news report stated that if you caught the coronavirus and the flu at the same time your chances of dying were doubled. I joined the queue. I had the jab. Eight weeks later my arm was still black, blue and yellow. I kid you not.

Christmas and New Year celebrations were cancelled, so I spent the holiday alone with my comfort food and watched the Queen give her Christmas speech from Windsor Castle, which encouraged me to do some more research. Elizabeth I fled there for safety when the bubonic plague was rife in London. She set up gallows in the marketplace as a warning to anyone who dared to journey to Windsor from disease-ridden London. That was probably around the time when she said, “Let them eat cake!” So I did.

Oops. Wrong queen. Never mind, the French apple tart I made with the help of Mary Berry was quite fitting, don't you think? It was glazed with warmed apricot jam which had been left over from when I used it to attach the marzipan to the Christmas cake—which I actually managed to share. You see, I'm not such a glutton after all.

So, there I was in January with my sleeve rolled up yet again. It was surprisingly emotional, not in the sense of being nervous at having a sharp needle stuck into my arm, but at the fact that this longed-for freedom was getting closer. I admit I treated myself as I said, "Well done, Yvonne." My shop is near the public hall, which was being used as a vaccination centre, so I had to unlock the premises to make sure that everything was safe as required by our insurers. So much out-of-date confectionery. Throw them in the bin, or down my throat? The decision must have taken all of five seconds.

The shop has now been closed for a total of twenty weeks to date, and it will probably be nearer to twenty-six by the time lockdown finishes. Half a year. So many retailers have collapsed under the continuing weight of rent, rates and paying a percentage of their staff's wages. The government has helped financially, which has kept our little shop out of the red, but it's difficult to trade for only half a year. We could have organised a *click and collect* which we did for a short while, but there comes a point when you wonder if it's worth the risk. Never before has our health mattered more.

I'm pinning my hopes on reopening at the beginning of April which should fit in nicely with my writing. I started a six-week Writing Historical Fiction online course, which will be completed in March, although I need to keep going with the novel while I'm still motivated. My deadline for *Secret Windsor & Eton* has been extended to the end of May, so I will hopefully be able to complete the photographic requirements by then. That leaves me free for sorting out the shop. I'm going to fling my arms around every customer who comes in—not to frighten them into spending their money but simply because during lockdown I would have given up all my chocolate, sweets, cakes and even that bag of jam doughnuts for just one lovely big hug from another human-being.

The Lonely Wardrobe by Sally Hewitt

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, the clothes hanging in the wardrobe had a life. They went to brunches, lunches, museums, concerts, the theatre and to Wimbledon. They power dressed for work: the pin-striped navy trousers killed it, closing deals and busting balls. No one would stand in the way of those trousers. The party dresses went out dancing. This brocade dress hanging here, rimmed with ostrich feathers that tickled just above the knee, flew to Ireland for a friend's big birthday. It mingled with two-hundred others in a softly lit marquee, enjoying cocktails, canapés, a sit-down four-course dinner and a band flown in from somewhere that pumped out one favourite tune after another. Equally lovely dresses in gold glitter, silk chemise and other elegant cuts swirled and shimmered on the dance floor, twirling, trailing and teasing, displaying surgically enhanced décolletage like generals display their medals. All night, the ostrich feathers floated round and round, feeling like the belle of the ball.

Shoes, in the wardrobe neatly lined up, kept the dresses company on nights out. See these black suede mules with pearls? They are clubbing shoes, kicked off at 3am and lost under the bed for months. These thigh-high Italian leather boots, coupled with skinny jeans, tempt the eye seductively towards the crotch. They walk with style and strength and aren't quite vampish, but nearly. These trainers, costing over £300, with one G upright and another upside down, aren't for training. No, they've hardly walked a mile, they are so precious. They go with the purse on the shelf above, which is fake, but who would know? They've had some fun seeing Barry Manilow live at the Albert Hall. They've swayed to "Mandy."

The beloved clothes, purchased with hope and gleeful anticipation of fun and productivity, now rested in the closet like cadavers in a mass burial ground untouched, gathering dust and warding off moths, asleep, waiting for resurrection and for life to begin again.

The wardrobe was opened every day, but these items sat useless as athletic wear invaded the cupboard space. Lacy lingerie lay redundant while shapeless running bras piled up in the laundry. Enormous granny pants replaced thongs as the visible panty line no longer mattered. Joggers that sagged off the buttocks replaced those slim-fitting skinny jeans. Sweatshirts, perhaps with a smidgin of yesterday's pasta sauce, were chosen over the fabulous cashmere. Because who cared? Who was going to see that dribble of marinara which would probably never come out in the wash anyway? The wardrobe had come a long way down since the days of ball-busting blue pinstripe trousers. It had fallen into the depths of slob.

What the clothes needed were places to go and people to see. When oh when would they be rescued and brought back to life? Who would do it? Would a fairy wave her magic wand and save these poor lonely things from the dark life of the wardrobe? Would a prince hack through the jungle of dust and wake them from their slumber?

The shoes rattled with dismay as the wardrobe once again slammed shut for the day. The Gucci trainers groaned. They had been purchased only a month before the evil, evil virus

suddenly stopped life. By the time they re-emerged, trainers paired with dresses would most likely be out of fashion. Yes, they saw Barry and swayed to “Mandy,” but did that justify their over £300 cost?

In the dark, cold days of winter they worried that they would be made redundant, considered five years behind fashion and sent to some mouldy goodwill or popped onto eBay to be sold into cheap slavery. The party dresses worried the most, but those pin stripes couldn't see a way forward either. Depression sunk in as more track suits filled the rail. Meanwhile, the door rattled shut every day.

Then one morning, after being held prisoner for over 365 days, sunlight poured into the wardrobe. The light was the most welcome thing the clothes, shoes and handbags had seen in weeks. It beamed through the dust mites like magic. Was it a fairy godmother come to rescue them?

The evil butt-sagging sweats were ripped from their hangers and piled into a bin liner. Those blue pinstripes, the ones that were most afraid of redundancy, were taken out, zipped up (though with a bit of a struggle over a wider tummy) and let out to make deals.

And night after night, the dresses danced once more.

Lockdown Blues by Wendy Turner

In the days of Coronavirus...

Do you remember 2020?
The time when all the towns were empty?
Pubs closed unless they could serve a full meal
Came up with their answer: here's the deal
It's a pint and scotch egg

Locked down again and again
Cars not in use, don't take the bus or train
No coffee or lunch out, make do with toast
And only "bubble" with someone close
Says Boris

Masks and plastic gloves every day
Hand sanitizer and disinfectant spray
Social distancing becomes an art
Leap about keeping two metres apart
And only talk side by side

March, April, May, June
Solitary walkers, hikers, bikers and soon
Everything went online, nowhere to play
Schools closed and day after day
Only BBC bite-size learning

Suddenly—clean parks, clean coast, cleaner air
Hares and deer seen once again here and there
We're all playing, creating and rediscovering
Old skills, old loves and learning new things
Even what's lurking at the back of the freezer

Use the app for track trace and test
Sorry, it happens to the best
Of us. But it has to be done
To get the R rate under one
Think mole and mallet

In summer, almost good again
But "air corridors" allow holidays in Spain
Greece, South Africa and the USA
And R shot through the roof before we could say

Jack Virus

Good news—there's sport on TV but no fans
Just cardboard cut-outs in the stands
Canned cheering and we're even shown
Bubbles when West Ham are playing at home
Who's blowing them?

As we head towards Christmas, we're put into tiers
What we're allowed varies it soon appears
Only two sitting in a bucket together
And do wear your mask whenever you tether
Your donkey if you live in Manchester

In Spring 2021, it's the best of twelve rounds
The Virus v the Vaccine, who will be crowned
Super-heavyweight? And no mutating or other
Ghastly underhand behaviour. We can't hack another
Round of Lockdown Blues.

COVID Canine-teen by Sam Ellis

“HARPER!”

The scream could be heard across the park. The heads of walkers, runners and amblers turned to the sight of a man sprinting after a black puppy who was bounding across the grass, its tongue flailing, straight towards a large brown puddle.

“HARPER! HARPERRR!!!”

As the man ran, he yanked the unyielding zip of a fluorescent green bum bag he had tried to keep hidden inside a smart coat. At the third jerk the bag ripped and a shower of dogfood exploded around him. A roll of pink poo bags which had caught at one end unravelled and trailed behind him like the tail of a kite.

“HARPER! STOP!” the man shouted as the rampant dog ran in between the legs of a shocked courting couple. Harper skidded to a halt as she neared the edge of the puddle.

“Harper, don’t you dare. Harper... HARPER!”

But it was too late. Just as the man was within grasping distance, Harper leapt high into the air and landed on all fours in the big dirty puddle.

What an idiot that man is, I thought. Making a spectacle of himself. This guy doesn’t have a clue.

The problem was that guy was me.

It was one of the many times in recent months where I’ve asked myself, *Why oh why did I agree to get a dog?* It’s a question I’ve asked many a time in recent months...

Back in January 2020 my life was cruising along nicely. Building work had finally finished on our house. When my fiancé and I bought the place, it had a damp problem, cracked windows and an avocado bathroom suite adorned with an assortment of orange, pink and cream tiles. Hardly a palace, but for four years all of our free weekends were spent sanding, painting, plastering, and building as best we could so finally it could be called home.

We had the loft converted into the master bedroom, as well as complete renovation of the bathroom and study, which fulfilled a dream of mine of having a show-stopping bookshelf to hold my modest but much-loved collection of books. I particularly loved the garden. I’d never had one before but always suspected it would become a passion. As the years passed, I was able to transform the dull patch of lawn into a haven with colourful borders and a patio. It was an absolute dream after years of poky flats and cramped living. Life was sweet.

And yet a sense of something missing had undoubtedly been creeping in, so the idea of getting a dog had been discussed more seriously than in previous years. My fiancé had grown up with them, his parents had one, and ever since I’d known him, he had badgered me about it, but the demands of both of us having 35-hour plus working weeks in London meant it was clearly impossible. That, and the fact I’d never looked after more than a goldfish before (although it did live for ten years—so I was told).

And then two events converged. First, the dangers of COVID were rapidly being exposed and acted upon, shutting offices including mine and those of my fiancé meaning we both were forced to work from home. Second, my fiancé's parents' dog, Casey, died. She was very loving, calm, obedient and affectionate, so her loss was shattering.

With fond memories of Casey still raw, we spoke to our local friend who juggled owning a dog and having a full-time job. She really opened our eyes to all of the support available if we were to go back to our offices someday. That same week my fiancé's company swiftly announced that they would not be returning to offices any time soon, and that even once the offices were open again, flexible home working was here to stay. It was enough. My fiancé placed a call to the dairy farm where his parents had got Casey.

A few weeks later, out of a barn came a girl holding in her gloved hands what at first appeared to be a ball of black fur. As she neared, the ball unfurled itself to reveal a nose, then a head, and then dark brown eyes.

"Ahh, she's lovely isn't she," said the girl. "What you gonna call her?"

"Harper," we replied in unison. Harper, our dog. It had finally happened, and there was no turning back.

We were smitten, and as we held her in our arms, we knew she was part of the family. When we got her home, we put her in the garden and played all afternoon in the sunshine. When evening came, we had braced ourselves for a restless night of crying, but she slept peacefully until late the next morning.

It was a great start – the best we could hope for. But it was not to last.

Within a week, my life was turned upside-down, along with most of my wardrobe. While I was aware that puppies were known to bite in their early months as a crucial part of their development, I hadn't appreciated quite what that meant. It's no lie to say that half of my t-shirts were sacrificed to my lack of understanding. Many was the morning I'd put one on, only to spy the tooth-sized hole which consigned yet another garment to an ever-growing bin bag in the corner of our bedroom. My hands bore the brunt of it though, with scratches not unlike the time I fell off my bike headfirst into a holly bush.

It wasn't just the biting. Barking seemed to be Harper's hobby, with every vaguely unusual noise producing a *yap-yap-yap* that we just couldn't stop despite offers of food, distraction with a toy or the increasingly-heard and exasperated demand of "GET ON YOUR MAT!"

This isn't to mention the other forms of destruction. Working from home, I was on a video call with my team when suddenly the screen went black, and my internet connection was lost. I headed downstairs to check the router while I frantically tried to log back in using my phone, only to find a waggy-tailed Harper sat beside two pieces of frayed wire.

Our beloved house also fell victim. When Harper arrived it was spotless. Within a week, scratch marks appeared on the skirting boards and the 100-year-old wooden floor had sizeable chunks missing. Rainy days were the worst, as Harper would come running in from the garden where she had been rolling in a flower bed, paw-prints in her wake, and shake herself down, often spraying newly-ironed laundry in mud. It was like the shower scene in *Psycho*.

The garden too, was destroyed within a month. Where neat lawn had previously grown, now there were brown patches. Where flowers once grew now stood half-chewed leaves. Harper wouldn't leave the flower beds alone, so we had to surround them all with a chicken-wire fence, exchanging the English-country garden effect for one of Wormwood Scrubs.

While I look back on these moments with some nostalgia, there is one thing I find difficult to forget—the relentlessness of it all. The biting was incessant and drew blood almost daily. The barking wouldn't stop and cut through me each time. Our home that we had loved and cared for was being ruined. Day after day it was much of the same—biting, barking, destruction, and few of the fun moments we'd had upon her first arrival. For months this continued with seemingly no change, and the assurances from my fiancé that “It's a phase” were wearing thin not just with me, but with him too. Juggling longer and longer days of working from home, and with increasing lockdown pressures, something was going to give.

Things finally came to a head at the end of a long work week for both of us, and a long week of Harper misbehaving. The wine started to flow, as did our true feelings, finally dispelling the any illusions we had that the other was finding it easier.

“I don't remember it being like this,” my fiancé said. “I swear it wasn't this hard. I guess my parents did a hell of a lot more than I realised.”

The whole night left me feeling very glum. I loved Harper to bits, but it was clear we needed help. The next day I called up our local friend, the one who told us how she managed with her dog. I explained the situation and the difficulties.

She was silent for a moment after I'd finished telling her about the biting, the barking, the misbehaviour and everything between.

“Sam,” she said, “don't worry. It's perfectly fine to feel this way. I remember a time when my dog was the same age as Harper, and I went into complete meltdown, wondering what on earth I was doing by getting a dog. But I spoke to my friend who told me what I'm gonna tell you—if you don't have that moment where you ask yourself, *What have I done?!* then you're not normal.”

It was like a light had been switched on. Knowing that this was normal made me feel an awful lot better. Somehow, from then on, it got easier. I stopped feeling bad and relaxed more, and so did Harper. She stopped biting so much as her puppy teeth fell out, and the memories of bloodied hands faded. She seemed to be calming down, and while we had the occasional incident, the damage to the house was lessening.

We finally stopped denying the fact that the house that we had laboured on and loved for so long was not really suitable for the three of us, so we moved to somewhere with a bigger garden. My parents joked she was the most expensive dog ever known. Strangely, I didn't miss the old house as much as I'd thought. Even with all of my books stored away in boxes rather than proudly on purpose-built shelves I didn't mind at all. I felt better.

We had much more fun with Harper too. Sure, she wasn't perfect and misbehaved a lot, but slowly we learned to manage it better. I enrolled us in puppy classes, which she and I both loved. I learned how to make training fun. Playing became quite a serious business, but Harper couldn't tell.

So when Harper looked up at me from the middle of the big dirty puddle I remembered that the man making a spectacle of himself was well and truly me. Instead of being sat in my old house, books neatly in order, a lush garden to gaze upon, I was looking down at a very muddy, very happy puppy.

“Now Harper,” I said, “that’s very naughty, isn’t it?” I broke into a smile.

She ran to me, brown water exploding about her, and jumped into my arms. I immediately felt the cold, dirty water on my chest soak through my smart coat I used to keep for best. Her tail was wagging wildly too, against my trouser leg which also rapidly soaked. She licked my face with her huge tongue, and I laughed. What a mess I must have looked.

I couldn’t be happier.

Missing Cats by Phillip Mitchell

People were sticking up posters of missing cats. Maybe there'd always been that many posters of missing cats and I'd only started noticing them now, confined to the neighbourhood as I was. Or were more cats going missing than normal? Perhaps there were the same number of cats going missing, but because their owners were stuck at home, they'd actually noticed their cats were missing, and had time on their hands to launch lost cat hunts? Or were cats so fed up of their owners being at home all day, used to having the place to themselves, they'd run away? Who knows?

One of the missing cat posters was stuck with broad brown sticky tape to the lamppost outside my house. People stood and gawped at it, probably thinking the cat looked familiar—being as it looked like every other tabby cat—trying to remember where they'd seen it. Sometimes they saw me gawping at them gawping, and I wanted to shout, “Stop gawping. Stay home. Save lives.” But I kept quiet, avoiding the possibility they'd come over and contaminate me with their germey breath.

I saw countless more cat posters during my permitted exercise—walks around the park, arms pumping as I leapt like a startled flea away from those people idly breaking my two-metre infection boundary. And there were more posters on my route to the supermarket where I'd go to top up on milk, tea and chocolate. I didn't need much else as I mainly ate pasta, having stocked up early before everyone else stole it, filling my spare bedroom with enormous plastic bags of exotically named pasta shapes. I hadn't eaten pasta much beforehand, maybe a deluxe microwavable lasagne at the weekend, and having pasta for lunch and dinner was doing something funny to my skin—turning it waxy, like cheese.

As well as the cat posters, I also saw a lot of people on my walks. Crowds, standing should-to-shoulder, unmasked, chatting, laughing, stroking each other's unsanitary dogs. Didn't they know there was a pandemic on? They should've been inside. Like me. Except when I wasn't. Someone needed to do something about it, or we'd be isolating at home forever.

Since being furloughed from work, I'd discovered a love of wildlife documentaries. The voiceovers were meditative, calming. I could close my eyes and imagine creatures running, eating, and mating in beautiful natural surroundings. And I've always liked animals. Not all of them of course—they have to have a friendly face. Anyway, I was watching a documentary about rainforests, mainly parrots and monkeys, when I had my idea on how to keep people in their homes. And when my idea appeared, I chuckled out loud, causing me to choke a little on lunchtime's pasta.

Emptying my drawers and wardrobe, clothes flying to the floor, I searched for suitable attire. And that night, under the cover of darkness, dressed all in black, including a tight-fitting balaclava I'd had since primary school, and looking like a less agile ninja, I snuck outside to the lamppost and tore off the cat poster, leaving ragged shreds of paper caught in the sticky tape.

Working excitedly on my laptop, trembling and giggling, I made my own copy of the cat poster. Instead of a tabby, my missing cat was black. Rather than Timmy, my cat's name

was Shadow. He was skittish and shouldn't be approached. Shadow hadn't been seen for days.

It took a while to find the right photo on the Internet, but the one I found was perfect. You'd need to do a double take to realise it wasn't a house cat. Its snarling jaws revealed the gleaming pointed teeth of an Amazonian black jaguar.

For a contact number I used my Dad's mobile, which had sat in my kitchen drawer since he died. And I offered a reward of £1000 instead of the going rate of £100 for news of a lost cat.

I cursed my temperamental printer as it chewed up paper, until eventually, it spooled out smudged grey copies of my poster. The poor print quality made the posters seem more authentic somehow, like photocopies of a photocopy of a photocopy, like the search for my missing cat was desperate.

Still dressed in black, and armed with a roll of brown parcel tape, I went round the dark streets covertly sticking my poster on lampposts, telegraph poles, walls, bus shelters, and post boxes. My tongue tasted of sticky tape glue where I bit it into strips. A dog walker surprised me from behind, saying hello to me as I taped a poster to someone's wheelie bin, and trying to appear relaxed, like I wasn't up to no good, I whistled random notes, as if that was a normal response. His concerned look as he walked off almost made me retrace my route and tear every poster down, the silliness of the idea suddenly alarming me. But it was cold, I was tired, and I wanted to crawl into bed and watch a documentary about bears.

When I'd finished, there was no way anyone could travel from their home and not see one of my posters. My aching legs told me I'd probably covered a two-mile radius. I made myself a hot water bottle and slumped into bed, falling asleep to the soothing voice of a woman describing the solitary life of arctic polar bears.

The next morning, on opening the curtains, a middle-aged couple in matching yellow raincoats were staring at my poster on the lamppost. The man took a photo of it on his mobile phone. The woman tugged at the man's arm, eyes wide with worry, trying to pull him away, and he smiled at her as he jabbed at the poster. She sprinted off without him, and he reluctantly followed.

The next two people who passed didn't glance at the poster. There were so many missing cat posters, some people were probably immune to them.

Then a skinny woman with a pink bobble hat and sparkly facemask stopped at the poster. She took out her phone, and I realised as her head darted up and down, she was entering the numbers for Dad's mobile. I watched her talking, leaving a message, before she walked off.

Surprisingly, although it hadn't been charged for months, I pressed the power button of Dad's phone and it glowed to life. I listened to her message: *"Hi. I've seen your poster and I think I saw your cat in the bushes by the primary school."* Her name was Felicity. She left me her telephone number.

Soon more calls came in, the phone singing a bright melody and vibrating. I let them all go to voicemail and listened to the messages over cups of tea. They ranged from honest accounts of where they'd seen my cat to raging panic:

"Have you reported it to the police?"

"Someone could get killed!"

"I think Shadow killed my cat Timmy."

When I went for my regular exercise that afternoon, the streets felt quieter. Despite it being a sunny and mild day, there were fewer dog walkers, children, and joggers. I didn't have to leap away from people walking three-abreast. I didn't have to watch my back for cyclists passing too close. I even braved the narrow path to the woods that I'd been avoiding for fear of bumping into someone, and I revelled in the birdsong and the scent of trees. My posters had worked. I skipped along, incredibly pleased with myself, weaving across the pavement and zigzagging across fields. It was bliss.

When I arrived home from my invigorating walk, I was shocked as the local radio interrupted my favourite Greatest Hits of the 80s programme with news of jaguar sightings: in the garden centre carpark, drinking from the duck pond, riffling through the bins of the fish & chip shop. Amazingly, the story was on the local TV news that evening, and on the national news at 6pm. Experts told listeners how dangerous a jaguar could be. It could knock a person out with one swipe of its paw and bite through your skull.

People on my street watched nervously from their windows as the police helicopter flew over the neighbourhood, hovering where a jaguar might lurk. A cruising police car passed every hour, two officers scanning the streets and gardens. A special helpline was set up to handle the volume of concerned callers.

There were three hard knocks on my front door. My face flushed warm and sweat trickled down the back of my neck as I opened it.

"Stay indoors," advised a Policewoman with a facemask beneath a riot helmet, wearing a stab-proof vest, eyes darting around, anticipating a jaguar's swift attack. "Let us know if you see any signs: scratch marks, unusual droppings, noises." She handed me a leaflet with a number to call.

"Are you okay, Sir?" she asked. "You look feverish."

My throat dried up and I coughed.

She recoiled.

"Goodbye," she said, already halfway to my neighbour's house.

I closed the door and breathed a sigh of relief, but soon guilt was sitting heavy and low in my stomach. The effects of my posters were more serious than I'd expected. I'd wanted people to stay off the streets so I could enjoy a quiet walk. I hadn't wanted to cause panic. I hadn't meant for this to be an event of national concern.

That night, I dressed in black again. I had a new poster to put up. An apology note.

I scurried round the quiet streets, keeping to the shadows, tearing off my old posters and sticking up new ones. When I saw police officers on foot, I hid, holding my breath, pulse racing until they'd passed.

I had trouble tearing one poster off a bus shelter. When it eventually tore, I tumbled on my back and dropped my sticky tape. In the dark, I couldn't see where it'd gone and searched around on all fours, dirtying my hands and knees. Then I laughed, because I realised the tape was stuck to my bottom, a strip hanging down between my legs like a tail. As I reached for it, someone shouted, "The cat's over there." There was a terrifying bang, and my bottom exploded with the pain of hot fire. Advancing across the road were two black-clad men, enormous guns raised and pointing at me. And like a wild beast I yowled, "Noooooo!" as another bullet tore into my behind.

As I lay face down on the hospital bed, strong pain-relieving drugs loosening my tongue, I told the story of my missing cat posters. Under the narrow scrutinising gaze of detectives, my excuses for causing so much trouble involved boredom, hallucinations brought on by excessive pasta consumption, and being led astray by an evil mind-control ring led by David Attenborough. In court, a judge called me foolish and fined me the same £1000 as the reward for finding my jaguar.

Although it was revealed to be nonsense, sightings of my jaguar continued to flood in. It was climbing trees, scratching fences, and running through gardens. So, wary of a jaguar attack, people stayed at home. Our area had one of the lowest infection rates in the country. The lowest deaths. And no-one's ever thanked me for that. Not once. Never. Probably too busy looking for their missing cats.

About the Contributors

Ben Bergonzi

Ben has done a variety of jobs which help him with his writing: museum curator, specialist in digitising historical documents, and superintendent registrar. Currently, he organises student placements for a university and is a volunteer coach for the unemployed. Over his ten years' membership of Verulam Writers, he's drawn encouragement through competing in short story competitions. He can be found on Facebook and LinkedIn and is a regular reviewer on Goodreads.

Barbara Cooper

Barbara says: I have won some competitions but ambitions to be a pro. have been thwarted by life and the need to earn some money on a regular basis. Perhaps, on the other hand, I'm lazy. No website, no social media. It's just a hobby now.

Benita Cullingford

Benita, married with two daughters, is a former LAMDA teacher/ drama adjudicator. Benita writes for stage and screen, with work including the radio play, *Pick UP*, and short films, *Smile Baby Smile* and *Bloomsbury Blues*. She's the author of three published books, and is Hon. Treasurer for the Society of Women Writers & Journalists.

Sam Ellis

Sam has been a member of Verulam Writers since 2009, where he is currently editor of the newsletter *Veracity*. He studied Literature at Essex and Exeter universities, works in the media industry and is often found in the garden with his dog.

Jane Fookes

Jane is a journalist and editor by trade and also works as a playwright and writer. She can be found at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jane-fookes-b601b059/>

Judith Foster

Judith is by education a linguist; in her working life a builder; in her first retirement painter and printmaker, and now, in her second retirement, she's returned to words.

Sally Hewitt

Sally has an MFA in creative writing from The Johns Hopkins University and has had short stories published in the US. She also writes a fortnightly book review for *The Hitchin Comet*. When she's not on furlough, she is the Events Manager at David's Bookshop based in Letchworth, Herts

Barbara Kuessner Hughes

Barbara was born in Malaysia and grew up there and in Singapore. Her short stories and flash fiction have been published in an anthology and various periodicals, and they've been listed in several competitions. Mostly recently, Barbara came second in the Cranked Anvil Short Story Competition. Website: <https://www.barbarakuessnerhughes.com>

Clare Lehovsky

Clare read Classics at BA and MA level and is currently doing an MA in Museum Studies. She writes mainly historical fiction, sometimes fantasy and occasionally poetry. Her poem is inspired by her time at an empty RAF Museum during Covid-19 while her family were front-line doctors. Email: clehovsky@btopenworld.com

JL Merrow

JL Merrow is that rare beast, an English person who refuses to drink tea. She writes award-winning contemporary gay romance and mysteries, and is frequently accused of humour. Find JL Merrow online at: <https://jlmerrow.com/>, on Twitter as [@jlmerrow](https://twitter.com/jlmerrow), and on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/jl.merrow>

Phil Mitchell

Phil is a writer of novels and short stories from St Albans and has been the chairperson of Verulam Writers since 2020. He often writes under the name of Steven Mitchell to avoid confusion with his popular EastEnders namesake. www.stevenmitchellwriter.com

Yvonne Moxley

Yvonne enjoys writing non-fiction books and has had published the *A-Z of Aylesbury - Places, People, History*—available in bookshops in Aylesbury and on Amazon. Due out in late 2021 is an *A-Z of Windsor & Eton*, and *Secret Windsor & Eton* is due in 2022. She's currently reverted to re-writing the same historical novel for the umpteenth time.

Rebecca Nesbit

Rebecca writes fiction and non-fiction about science and the ethical questions it raises. Her most recent novel, *Places I Don't Belong*, is told from the perspective of a mother whose son has been accused of rape. It is available for free on her website: www.rebeccanesbit.com. Twitter: [@RebeccaNesbit](https://twitter.com/RebeccaNesbit)

Robert Paterson

Robert is Vice-Chairperson and Co-Secretary of Verulam Writers. He has been writing since he was 5, primarily fiction, and maintains a blog of his written work on Wordpress. He isn't a published author yet, but never say never!

Tina Shaw

Tina is a retired social worker and has lived in St Albans for most of her life. She has always enjoyed writing and has had small successes with articles and fiction being published. She has been a member of Verulam Writers for over ten years.

John Spencer

John is a published author of over 30 non-fiction books on the Paranormal and Business topics. He is currently President of VWC. He joined the VWC to develop skills in writing fiction and now has three books completed which are seeking publishers/agents. John can be contacted at john@connorspencer.com

Wendy Turner

Over the years Wendy Turner has contributed articles to *People's Friend*, *The Countryman*, *This England* and *Evergreen* magazines and produced two books: *A-Z of St Albans* (available in St Albans Cathedral and bookshops and on Amazon) and *A-Z of Lincoln*, which both cover Places, People and History. Wendy has been an active member of Verulam Writers for around twenty years.

Dave Weaver

Dave has had five novels released by the Dartford-based speculative fiction publishers Elsewhen Press. He's also been featured in various anthologies and self-published three short story collections on Amazon Kindle plus his latest novel, *The Transference*.

Also by Verulam Writers

The Archangel and the White Hart, edited by Jonathan Pinnock