

It's May 2021

Jenny Edkins¹

It's May 2021. India is in chaos. My twitter feed is filled with pleas from families seeking hospital beds and oxygen supplies for dying relatives. Images of closely-built pyres in cremation grounds in Delhi make their way around the world.

Britain sends a few hundred pieces of equipment. Pakistan offers more. In the UK over 60% of the adult population has received one jab; 16 million are fully vaccinated. In India, centre of vaccine manufacture, the figure is around 10%.

I find I can't bring myself to let my thoughts go there.

-oOo-

It's February 2020. I'm watching what's happening in China. Vast construction projects to build hospitals overnight. Huge cities quarantined with no one let in or out, though a coachload of Brits are returned to the UK and quarantined here. Medics wrapped head to toe in white hazmat suits.

Then Italy. Chaos. Hospitals overwhelmed. Decisions about who to treat. Rows of trucks outside waiting to take the bodies away. The whole of Lombardy cordoned off. It is clear that this could come to us, in the UK, and that we aren't doing anything about it.

It's week three of the online poetry course I started at the beginning of the month. The course is about the climate crisis, a follow-on to one, last autumn, on political poetry. My February attempt goes like this:

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To every thing there is a season

February 2020

It's bleak still out there.
The rain hasn't stopped for weeks.
Shrewsbury is under water,
the river risen for the second time this month
to fill basements and drown cars.
The trains are cancelled, the line to
Aberystwyth cut off.

Storms have brought
the beach onto the prom again.
Gusts tear branches from street trees.
Shops are deserted, bar a few
muffled figures braced against the wind
seeking what shelter they can find
from the sting of hailstones.

But look: in the garden,
as if it were a year like any other,
the stasis of winter yields to change.
Day by day the daffodils show more yellow,
buds appear on the snowberry
and tiny young leaves on the cherry
are already showing green.

And see: on the streets,
even as we despair,
a new generation calls for action.
Month by month their voices grow louder,
their demands we listen more insistent
and their calls for fresh beginnings
already point the way.

Summer will come, a half-forgotten time
of fruitfulness and bounty
as season follows season in its turn.
Take inspiration from the earth:
turn, turn away from lines of progress,
lay down the dream of never-ending growth,
and listen to the signs of what's to come.

-oOo-

It's March 2020, and bar washing our hands for twenty seconds while singing 'Happy Birthday', we don't seem to be noticing what's happening. Or rather, we do, we the people. On 12 March, I cancel a guest lecture: the chair is worried about vulnerable relatives. And I am doubtful about the three-hour train journey. On 13 March the

football stops, and on 17 March universities go online. All this well before our government acts. And when it does, it's as if it doesn't hear the urgency in what the WHO is saying, or see what is being done elsewhere. We are special, superior. World-leading in everything: we will be fine. Not like everyone else.

But we are like everyone else, we are just as vulnerable, and when they come our deaths just as horrific. I despair. Poetry seems impossible. My March poem speaks of the shock of an altered reality:

And a time for every purpose under heaven

March 2020

How to write
when nothing is certain,
when everything has changed
but looks the same?

Spring has arrived in the garden:
the daffodils nearly over,
blossom out on the snowberry,
bluebells ready to appear,
the cherry in full leaf,
and sunshine and blue skies
replacing the rain.

How to write
when time itself has stopped,
when imagining the future
is impossible?

On the streets, silence:
wild animals return to wander
in city deserts of concrete and stone;
goats loose in Llandudno,
swans on water running clear
for the first time in years
and air so pure it hurts.

How to write
when people are dying alone,
fighting for breath, drowning
in their own blood?

Summer will come and go,
as in other years,
but who will pick the strawberries
or gather fruit from the orchards;
who will prepare the funeral flowers
and who will comfort
those who mourn?

-oOo-

It's April now. April in lockdown. Here in Aberystwyth, a small coastal town at the end of the train line and two hours from a motorway in all directions, the plague reaches us slowly. Ceredigion Council sets up its own track and trace system early on. Cases here are kept low, deaths too. We obey the rules, stay at home. Rainbows appear in windows, drawn by children kept indoors. On Thursdays at eight in the evening, the town echoes to the clap for carers and people chat from their doorsteps.

In the rest of the UK, deaths rise. Spectacular Nightingale Hospitals are built, to rival those in Wuhan perhaps, though with no idea what they should be used for. Test, track and isolate is stopped. Hospital staff hastily but efficiently reorganise the wards themselves. They can see what's coming if no-one else can. I write my anger into my next poem:

Wash your hands: a song of coronavirus

After Bob Hicok²

The pandemic is coming
but we're not seeing deaths here yet.
When we've got more cases
we'll do something.
When we're gasping for breath.
When we've decided between saving
the economy or people's lives.
When there aren't enough ventilators
or happy birthdays to cover
everyone. When the science
says we should. When people
are dying. When white people
with no underlying conditions
are dying. We'll build Nightingales
and ICUs, put proper PPE
on our dead doctors and nurses,
lock up anyone
who goes out for a walk,
paint rainbows in our
windows, we'll become immune, we'll go
bodiless. At the right time.

I write a blog about how deaths are being disappeared.³ Deaths recorded as Alzheimer's by those who certify them but haven't seen the patient. It was probably

² Bob Hicok, 'Hold your breath: A song of climate change'. *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 26 August 2018, 17. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/23/magazine/hold-your-breath-a-song-of-climate-change.html>

³ Jenny Edkins, 'Disappeared deaths', Covid-19 Diaries, 15 April 2020, <https://covid19healthdiaries.com/diary?did=124>

Covid, but it won't count. People dying out of sight of family, with no vigil at the bedside, no last words, no viewing the body, no proper funeral, no visitors afterwards with their condolences.

Here in Aber, we settle into a routine, a different tempo. The weather is kind as I take my daily walk:

Exercise

April 2020

Sun on my back as I climb,
breathless but breathing,
the town laid out below,
no-one up here but me.

Each day greener than
the last, backlit branches
I should admire on
my steep way down.

A town held in the palm
of the hills, face to the sea,
worlds from danger,
holding its distance.

A cyclist sweeps past;
someone follows me
down into the cemetery:
I wait to let them by.

Separated by a sliver,
graves lie close,
slate headstones ranked
shoulder to shoulder.

In the park a woman
switches paths to avoid me.
We smile at each other
and the strangeness.

Avenues of trees in full,
glorious leaf arch ahead
to who knows what
summer may come.

The seven-thirty pulls out
empty into the stillness;
crows flap upwards,
silence settles back.

A toy lost two days ago
under the steel fence
is gone, the path clear
as it narrows.

In the playing field
a solitary figure kicking
ball against concrete
pauses for me to pass.

Greetings unspoken,
I head home. Today's tally:
one cyclist, three walkers,
nine hundred dead.

-oOo-

It's May, and lockdown continues. It's sinking in, the horror. And I'm realising what we've lost. What I've lost. Realising what it means when history strikes—to those of us who've been immune to its impact before. And what it means to mourn.

A time to mourn
May 2020

We mourn as the numbers rise—inexorably, unnecessarily,
unforgivably—weighed down by an all-consuming fury.

We mourn each other's loss, each loss compounded by absence,
each tale of video farewells and foregone funerals.

We are neither herds nor heroes—we are wise to the lies
and worse: the discrimination, the inequalities, the heartlessness.

We do not mourn our lost freedom, our meals out, our days
lingering over coffee, though we miss them all.

We mourn a deeper loss—of being-with, of gentle touch, of hugs
in this time of grief, of anger, disbelief and searing pain.

We are learning, we who have not seen such hurt before,
that we alone are each other's comfort. We shall not forget.

-oOo-

It's August 2020 now, and I still can't shake Covid from my writing. The bitterness and the anger remain. They re-emerge in another poem. I'm responding to a prompt about rhyme in another course. I struggle to find something to write about. I try various words—'trace' and 'missing'—in the rhyming dictionary, with no success. Then I try 'screen': we seem to spend so much time either on them or behind them at

the moment. This throws up many rhymes, and some surprising ones. I write this draft:

Strange times

Covid-19 times
unforeseen times
hunker down at home times
meet and greet on screen times
two week quarantine times
scramble for a vaccine times
hygiene and deep clean times
when will this be over times
obscene dream times
silent scream times

-oOo-

I've not written about Covid since then, I realise now. I don't follow what's happening closely any more. And so much is still happening.

My thoughts go to writings on collective trauma. Disasters that bring people together, a community of those with shared experience—experience others cannot comprehend. Disasters like floods, fires, contaminated water, nuclear accidents or landslides, their aftermath written about by Lucy Easthope, Kai Erikson, Daniel Renwick, and others.⁴

A memorial wall appears next to the Thames in London. Volunteers brought together by a group of relatives of the dead fighting for justice have painted 150,000 hearts. But it doesn't feel like a community disaster. Perhaps that's what's so horrific about it.

People dying in isolation from family. Funerals by video link. Farewells on FaceTime. Bodies triple-wrapped in body bags.

As for those of us not directly affected, we are separated by circumstance. Some retain job and income, some are furloughed, others laid off with no prospect of return. Some happy to stay at home or mask-up, others for whom home is not a place of comfort or safety, key workers forced to shoulder the risk.

'We're all in this together' has been the ubiquitous mantra. But we're not, are we?

⁴ Lucy Easthope, *The Recovery Myth: The Plans and Situated Realities of Post-Disaster Response*. Palgrave, 2018; Kai Erikson, *A New Species of Trouble: The Human Experience of Modern Disasters*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1994; Daniel Renwick, "Organising on Mute." In *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance and Response*, edited by Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins, and Nadine El-Enany, 19-46. London: Pluto, 2019.