



Life in the Present Tense

a selection of prose and poems from the
HEARTH Centre's 2020 project

HEARTH

Contents

Introduction	Polly Wright
Grass Roots	Bernadette Lynch
Garden Fever with apologies to John Masefield	Margaret Evans
Karma	Vivien Foulkes James
Our Lives in Brackets	Carole Hawkins
Hair Today	Ann Gibson
Solipsism	Barney Harper
The Extroverted Introvert	Jamie Wright
Zoom	Polly Wright
The Introverts Revenge	Ann Gibson
New normal	Karam Ram
Seen from a bus after Lockdown	Polly Wright
Pandemia	Oliver Cable
Having her Cake and Eat it	Liz Churchill
The Grief Butterfly	Mohammed from Iraq
Mum's Aid- Lockdown Motherhood	Ali Graves
Fragments	Vivien Foulkes James
Clocks	TF Webb
Afterwards	Vivien Foulkes James
Lockdown	Laurie Wright
Lockdown Diary	Ros Napier
Discontent and Fortitude	Maggy Markworthy
Blitz E15: No. 42 & No.17 1940	Hilary Spiers
Verbosity: A Tale of Words	Kashmir Tutt
Rhetoric Clap	Eithne Cullen
Credits & Acknowledgements	

Life in the Present Tense

In May 2020, the Hearth Centre received emergency funding from the Arts Council England to develop a project called Living in Times of National Emergency. With these funds we were able to set up a small competition to attract creative writing and some visual art about Life in Lockdown during the Coronavirus epidemic , but also to encourage reflections about similar situations in other countries, and in our own history. We are pleased to say that we received a variety of responses to our call out, including poems, prose, art works and scripts for short videos (please see our Youtube channel.)

This anthology includes some of the best of the shorter contributions, leading with the winning entry- Our Lives in Brackets by Carole Hawkins, which we felt was a perfect encapsulation of what some of us were going through. We also include some art work and extracts from the longer contributions with links to readings of the full stories.

We're hoping that this anthology serves as a reminder of the "unprecedented" times we went through back in 2020.

Polly Wright
Director of the Hearth Centre

December 2022

Grass Roots

Wake each dawn in the present tense
let blackcaps with flutes serenade me
drink in the birch, the cherry and cream
in bloom like a bridesmaid's bouquet

let blackcaps with flutes serenade me
count the sights of purple as I walk
in bloom like a bridesmaid's bouquet
peals of campanula, clumps of catnip

count the sights of purple as I walk
lavender with scent like slowing heartbeat
peals of campanula, clumps of catnip
breathing in a world come back to life

lavender with scent like slowing heartbeat
shaven lawns of watermelon fresh
breathing in a world come back to life
teach myself the calls of evensong

shaven lawns of watermelon fresh
a pitying of doves that coo on ridges
teach myself the calls of evensong
comfort as fat-bellied pigeons purr

a pitying of doves that coo on ridges
sinking supermoon pinks up the dark
comfort as fat-bellied pigeons purr
leave my hiding place and join the world

sinking supermoon pinks up the dark
drink in the birch, the cherry and cream
leave my hiding place and join the world
wake each dawn in the present tense

Bernadette Lynch

Garden Fever

with apologies to John Masefield

I must go down the garden again, to the lonely shed and the sky,
And all I ask is spade and fork to dig the ground so dry;
Watch marrows grow, runner beans sway and fruit trees in the morning,
A grey mist of aphid pests, and the courgettes forming.

I must go down the garden again, in the sun the wind and the rain
And all I ask is the hosepipe will not trip me up again;
And all I want is a calm day with the blue tits flying,
And secateurs and lots of string and the pigeons crying.

I must go down the garden again, tying beans to their tall poles
To the blackbird's way and the robin's way as it blows a tornado;
And all I ask is a ball of string from a helpful fellow-gardener,
And harvest fit to serve the wife when the Lockdown's over.

Margaret Evans



Karma

Sensing a change,
they wander into town.
In ones and twos they roam
down from the Great Orme
and into the deserted streets.
They re-group in Trinity Square
and confidently now, parade down
Mostyn Street, window shop as they go
before taking a nap in the churchyard.
This is their territory now.

In a far away market
an abomination,
animals as commodities,
captured, packed into cages,
pitifully they watch and await
their cruel fate. And so
the medieval trade continued,
as a virus jumped species.
Warnings went unheeded
and lessons were not learnt.

Nature is returning
to cities around the world,
the animals converging.
This is their territory now.
People have vanished,
transport halted,
an eerie stillness
hangs over all.
We stay home and wait,
we're in our cages now.

Vivien Foulkes James

Our Lives in Brackets

On hold (...)
with an unknown caller rejigging destinations
manipulating life – lives.
The future.
Contains
(what?)
What ifs?
Ah ... buts, so dangly
(on the high-wire)
that second guessing
The space ahead
is as teasing as the vaccine to coax
the miracle.
What status between
the now
(which has gone by the time you read to here),
or next Thursday, next year
or Wenursday if you can't remember;
(who does lately?).
And what of the unknown normal?
(If ever there becomes a normal
we recognise as normal).
Would a next phase unmask another wave
to be turned
on its globules and
sent packing?
Then,
can we close the brackets?

Carole Hawkins

Hair Today

Salons closed and no-one watching
I take scissors into my own hands.
Plenty to go at, and knowing less is often more,
I clip and chop, trim and snip,
extemporise with rash abandon
as frizz hits the cutting room floor.
What I'm left with suits;
ragged bits and stray spikes,
slant lines and wayward asymmetric flicks.
More me than the precision sculpt I've had for years,
this is what I've always wanted
but was afraid to ask for fearing raised eyebrows,
insinuations of mutton dressed as lamb
from the one who wielded power.
Now, no witnesses, I study my reflection;
less Narcissism, more admiration for my own creation
already looking forward to it growing out,
for another blank canvas to work on.

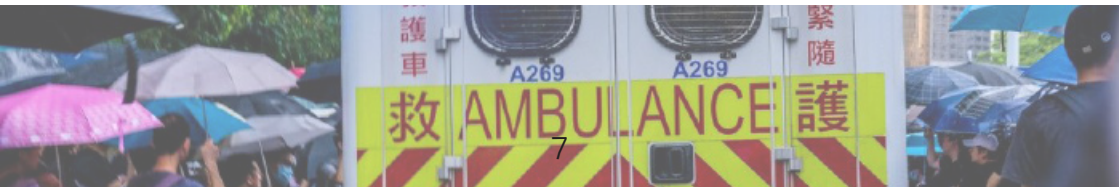
Ann Gibson



Solipsism

Is it wrong
that I hope we stay in lockdown
a little bit longer?
a little bit forever?
I like it here at home
making meals for me and my love
listening to no-one outside
but the birds
seeing my weekend ahead
with my plans of
nothing.
I prefer my face hidden
by a mask
so I can move incognito
around my neighbourhood
wearing my comfortable 70s cords
an uncool t-shirt
and my hair, wild and uncut.
Sometimes I think I wished
it into being, a world
where the government pays my wages
while I sit in my garden
and read books.
It is only the sound
of the ambulances
again and again and again
that reminds me
this is not about me.

Barney Harper



The Extroverted introvert

The extroverted introvert who lived all on his own
Had always said it made more sense for him to be alone
He socialised enough to get the contact he desired
But when the socialising stopped, he started to feel tired.

The extroverted introvert had always been okay
He recharged by himself then sought engagement in the day
He used his space to spread his wings, felt happy to be free
But when the space was all he had, he craved some company

The extroverted introvert stood by the choice he chose
This might have all been worse with someone treading on his toes
And in the end he knew this time was only temporary
But sometimes in the night, the length of time could seem quite scary

The extroverted introvert knew others had it worse
Particularly those for whom the company's a curse
And what a blessing to be free to sometimes just be lazy
But when that freedom got too much, he started to go crazy

The extroverted introvert who loved to pace and sing
Loved being without anyone to find him annoying
But when that became all he knew, he felt a small regret
That he didn't have a fellow singer, for just one duet

The extroverted introvert tried not to feel despair
Or that this whole scenario had all been quite unfair
That others still had loved ones, or a garden, or just chat
While he spoke through a laptop, feeling lucky to have that.

He refused to feel pitied, he was stubborn and resilient
He knew his mood was prone to swings, and soon he'd feel brilliant,
He refused to take the News to heart, dramatic as it seems,
He refused to feel dejected when he woke up from his dreams.

For he knew when this was over he'd appreciate it more
He'd never dismiss company like he'd have done before
He thought 'I hope I mean that' as he typed it on his phone
The extroverted introvert, who had to stay alone.

Jamie Wright

Zoom

Reflected in my mirror;
the brick house opposite,
The square of my window
Framed in its wood.

The clouds behind the rowan
Turn navy blue and engulf the
Once divided sky.
Night claims the street

A woman now stands,
lit, in her window
Staring out. But as my reflected world
Gains strength

my image of her looking out
Is doubly exposed. I'm looking
back at myself in a room
where a rowan tree grows.

These days the whole world is boxed
in windows, within Windows.
Smiling at our own faces, thinking
we are smiling at others.

Polly Wright

The Introvert's Revenge

Lockdown life is slow,
a chance to quit the vortex, turn away
from social life too busy for the brain.

Happy dallying in solitary pursuits;
a poor-man's piece of splendid isolation
(celebrities pay well for such retreats).

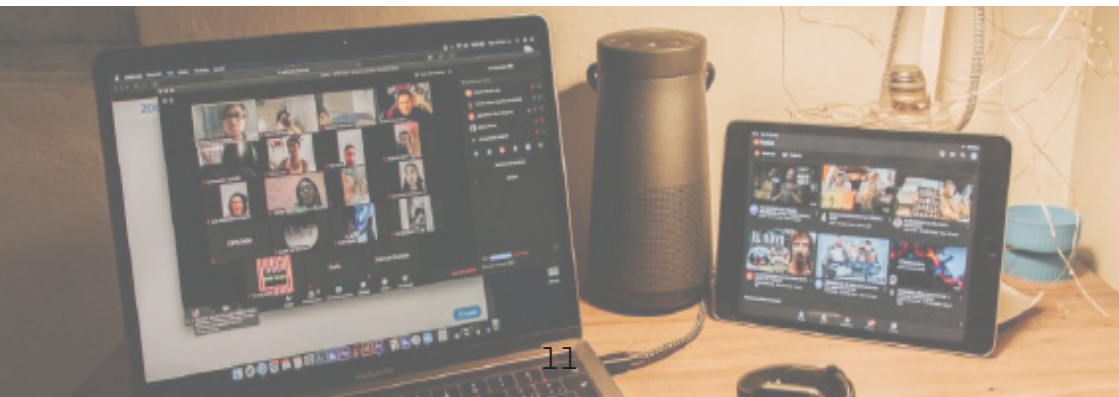
On the daily recommended yomp
company's conveniently forbidden;
milling shopping malls are all forgotten,
memories of teeming transport fades.

In supermarket queues two-trolley separation
hinders chat and, once inside, no-loitering
cramps gossips' itch to fake and rebake news.

But in this plague on all our houses, these
quiet compensations don't last long.

Two weeks in, the bubble bursts,
popped by rattled, shaken socialites
too twitchy to enjoy pandemic positives,
frantic on WhatsApp, FaceTime, Zoom.
And just like that, the quiet life is gone.

Ann Gibson



New Normal

Unwashed dishes
plates
cups
knives and forks
empty containers, discarded packaging

e v e r y w h e r e


on every surface, on the floor, on the coffee table, table, chairs,
mantelpiece, ledges and his bed

He stares out of the window,
the drugs have stopped his thoughts

and
the voices
in
his
head

he stares at the hedge

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of his hand
And Eternity in an hour



outside his front garden,
overgrown so he can't see the street
but it doesn't matter
because there's nothing there,
nothing there,
because it's lockdown,
lockdown, for everyone,
just like him.

Stopping, Stopping, Stopping, Stopping, Stopping, stopped.

the new normal.

He doesn't know what that is
Come to think of it, because he does,

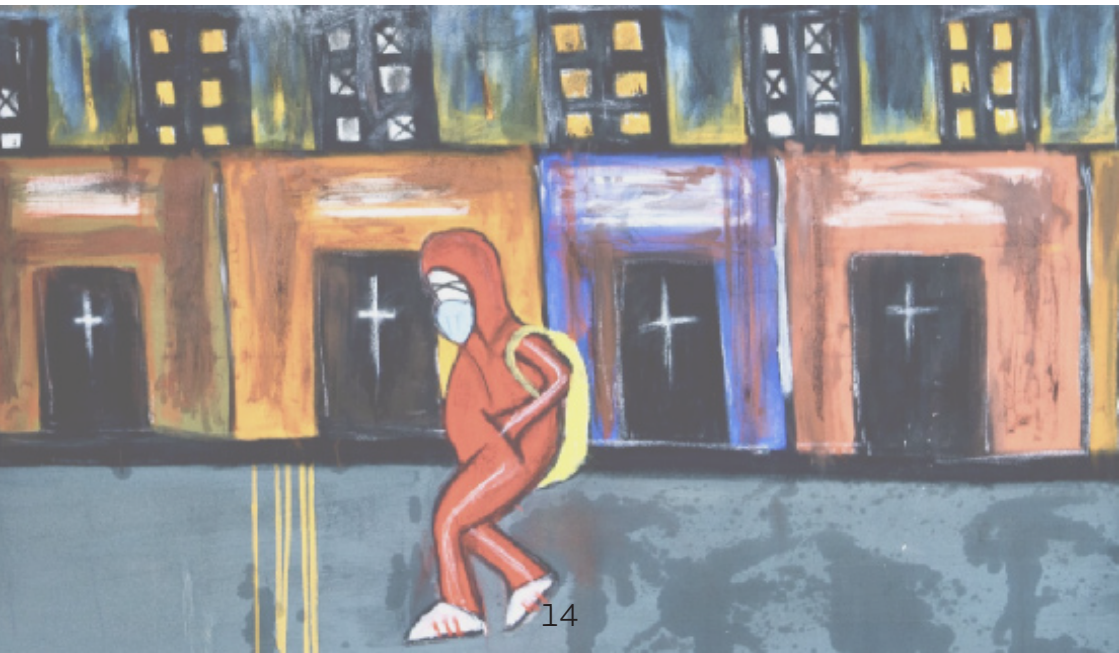
he didn't know what the old normal was.

Karam Ram

Seen from a bus after Lockdown

A
big
fat
beige sofa
in a
green front garden
invites you
to get
off.

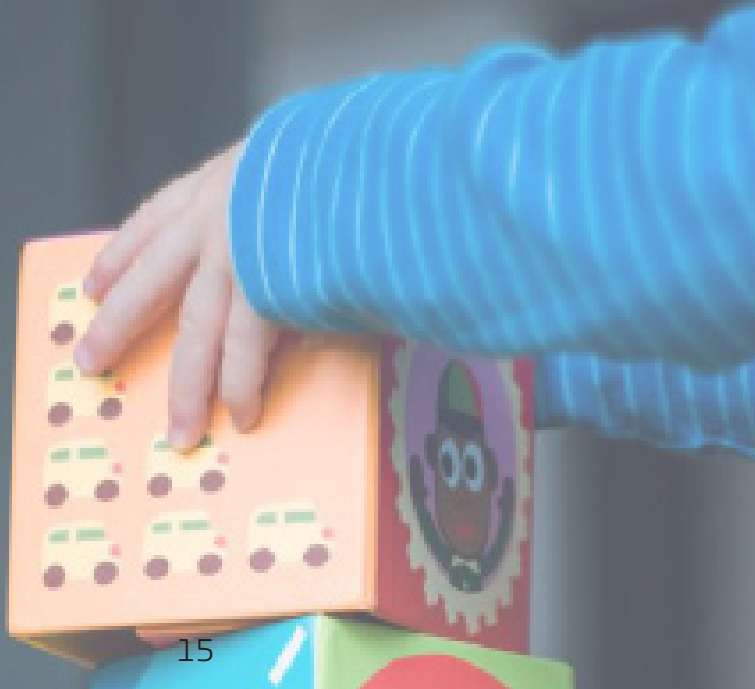
Polly Wright



Pandemia

coming in to land you used to pick out memories
poking through fog. nothing flies anymore
but electric bees chop months into neat tablets – now: easier to
swallow!
the prime minister's replaced my lightbulb
at long last, turning all reds into grey.
i see bars on white walls, blue skies
on houses i cannot visit.
i sit among words like a toddler
in dungarees, my motor skills
too clumsy. a tower lies in chunks.
will anyone come if i bawl?

Oliver Cable



Having her Cake and Eating It

In the time of lockdown, Mya and Samuel met on a facebook group for disgruntled local residents. Complaints were raked about like dog-chewed tennis balls. Speaking of dogs, something really must be done with the owners of the beasts that foul our pavements.

But with the Corona spring, concerns turned inward. Exactly how many rainbows was acceptable to display in one's living room window? We will judge our non nurse-clapping neighbours won't we? For heaven's sake, was ordering a take away charitable or wreckless in the current climate? And it was into this divisive discussion that Mya and Samuel waded. SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESS was IMPERATIVE they found themselves both interjecting one day. Mya took an instant shine to the profile photo of this man so vehemently of her own opinion. Two kindred spirits advocating for the surrounding stocks of yuk sung, wonton, sheek and shami kebabs, to be kept flowing.

One Tuesday evening or was it Wednesday? Couldn't have been Thursday - that's when Mya vuvuzela-ed in the street. Anyway, she'd just finished a youtube yoga session and was feeling a little more flexible and frisky, a little more yummy than the norm. So she clicked on Samuel's face. And sent him a DM.

From there things escalated between them like the speed and spread of the virus. One minute they were strangers, the next they were face timing all hours of the night. They believed righteously that they should set an example of helping out the little guy and so it was decided to order a regular supply of cakes for themselves from a selection of deserving, independent bakeries.

One Friday night or was it Saturday? Couldn't have been Sunday as that's when Mya dressed up as Cleopatra for her virtual house party. Anyhow, she'd just finished a Zoom Zumba, and, she was feeling quite loose, quite free, quite fresh, when she arrived upon an idea. It was not enough to simply order the cakes. They must take things to the next level. They must begin to eat their cakes in front of each other.

When she made this suggestion to Samuel, he became excited and immediately consented. A simple éclair was the first viewing. And it wasn't long before politeness was put to bed, in their dimly lit kitchens. They devoured the choux pastries, licking the chocolate from their lips and sucking the cream from their fingers. Their phones projecting pixels, forming visions of the other's great enjoyment.

At first this was all it was - a single spoil mutually consumed a couple of times a week. But it became apparent, very quickly, that this was not enough for Mya. She had been furloughed and all she could think about was when she could get her next fix. Samuel, however, was still working from home and the frequency they had established suited him perfectly. He became perturbed by Mya's appetite. It soon had to be every evening. Then every day. Then any hour of any day or night, messages would light up his screen. It was time to sample the blondies, the brownies, the cardamom knot, the cinnamon bun, the blueberry and thyme laminated brioche. On conference calls, voice notes urged him to try a passionfruit cruffin. At first light his phone buzzed, demanding a Danish dulce de leche. Last thing at night, images of pasteis de natas would beg for him. of rocky road to to try and temper things. But Mya was not prepared to stop what she had started and persisted in patisserie themed bombardment.

That was until Samuel had an idea. Enough was enough. One day he sent Mya a recording of her ecstatic demolition of a lemon meringue tart, closely followed by a screengrab of a facebook page, zoomed in on a 'post' button. Unless this sweet excess soured immediately, Samuel would share the intimate affair with all and sundry of the discontented local group. Some food for thought. Mya, alarmed, called a halt. The corona courtship thus ended as fast as it had begun.

And that is where the story ends. Though, one Tuesday, or was it Wednesday? It couldn't have been Monday because that's when Mya embarked on live, online meditation. Anyway, this particular day, Mya had just completed a virtual pub quiz when she found her eye lingering on one of the participants. The next thing she knew she was making contact and agreeing strongly with the importance of supporting local, independent breweries.

Liz Churchill



The Grief Butterfly

In the big forest there was a happy family far away from problems. They were really happy together.

They were always joking and close with their friends but when the dark day came, the big and beautiful forest was burned and they couldn't live there anymore. They had to move from there and find another place to live a new and happy life. It was so sad to leave that place where they had been living there for a long time. It was really hard for them.

They left together and they knew the way would be so hard with darkness everywhere.

They promised each other to fly together and find a new place to live, but when the storm came he took one of butterflies with him and threw him away from his family.

The storm was so unfair that he broke a wing of the butterfly.

Now the butterfly is so lonely and sad and afraid.

He was still trying to fly because he is alive but he's dead on the inside.

The grief butterfly found a place for himself to live but he was still thinking about his family.

Where are they?

Are they okay?

What's happening to them?

Many things and too many questions.

In real life, he's trying to find them but in his heart he made a small forest for himself and his family to live.

By Mohammed, 18, originally from Iraq

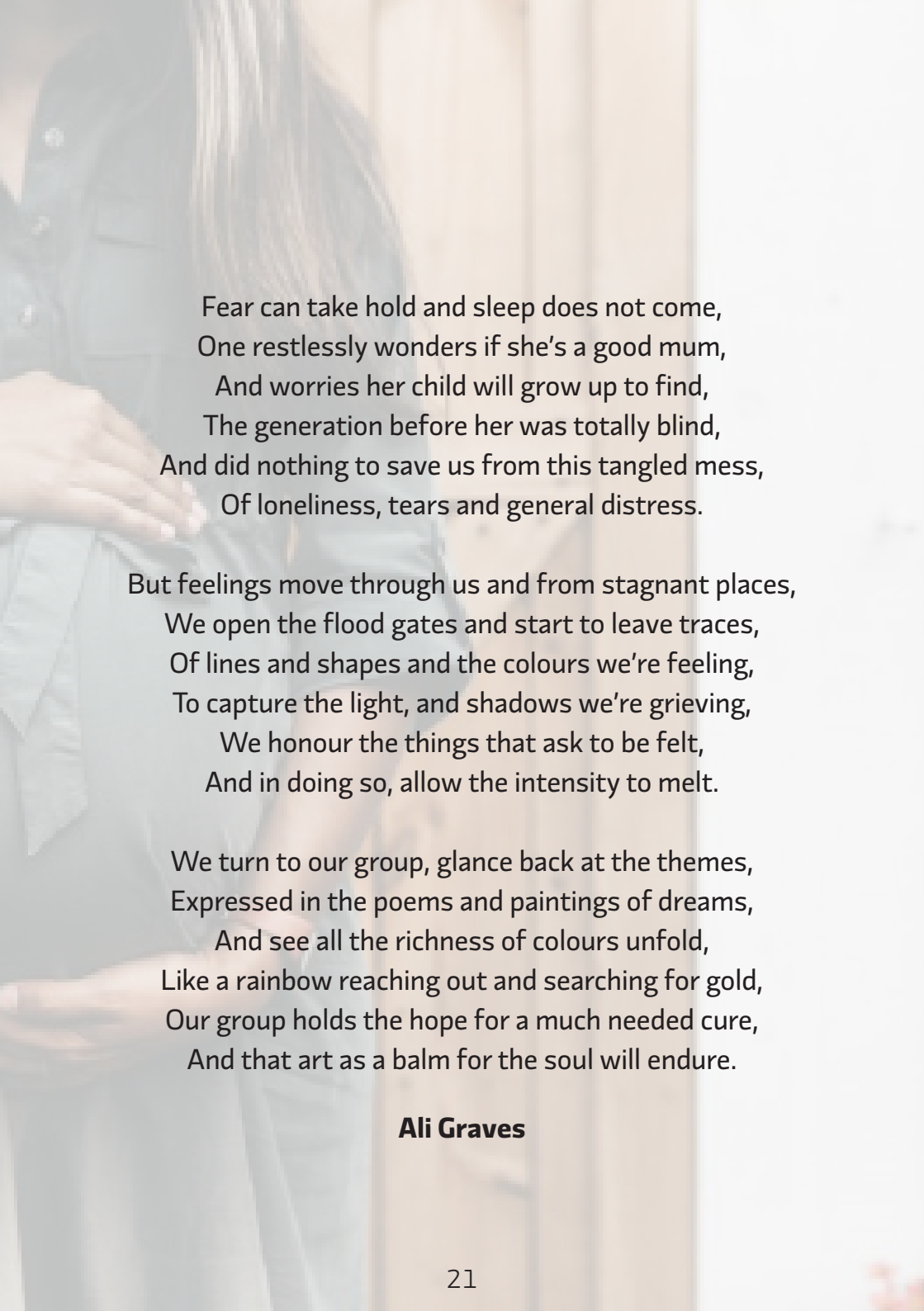
The Grief Butterfly was made into an animation in partnership with the author, the British Red Cross, the HEARTH Centre, Hope & Mania and produced by Cardboard Zebra Creative. It is available to watch on the HEARTH's website or on Youtube.

Mum's Aid- Lockdown Motherhood

We are all so different and yet we connect,
Through our journalling group on the Internet,
Each week we explore what it means to live through,
The pandemic as mothers and mums-to-be who,
Put pencil to paper and paint on our brushes,
And make splashes of hopes and the fears that can crush us.

Kindness can linger on the tip of our tongues,
And be caught in a smile, or the air in our lungs,
And be heard in a song or the 8 pm clap,
or wrapped up in a hug or the book in our lap,
And found in forgiveness of a day gone awry,
When the oughts and the shoulds and the musts fade away.

But some days, in trying to do everything,
The work, the cooking, the chores and home-schooling,
Getting fit, making calls, sending e-mails, doing filing,
Glancing at posts of everyone smiling,
The cup that was full, is nudged and gets spilled,
One of us screams and kindness is killed.



Fear can take hold and sleep does not come,
One restlessly wonders if she's a good mum,
And worries her child will grow up to find,
The generation before her was totally blind,
And did nothing to save us from this tangled mess,
Of loneliness, tears and general distress.

But feelings move through us and from stagnant places,
We open the flood gates and start to leave traces,
Of lines and shapes and the colours we're feeling,
To capture the light, and shadows we're grieving,
We honour the things that ask to be felt,
And in doing so, allow the intensity to melt.


We turn to our group, glance back at the themes,
Expressed in the poems and paintings of dreams,
And see all the richness of colours unfold,
Like a rainbow reaching out and searching for gold,
Our group holds the hope for a much needed cure,
And that art as a balm for the soul will endure.

Ali Graves

Fragments

Time hangs heavy,
what better time than now.
For twenty years it's been undisturbed,
hidden, in its lair beneath the stairs
and before that, another house, another lair.
I undid the case, its secrets divulged.
A hotch potch of ancient diaries,
address books, photos, postcards,
telegrams, identity and medical cards,
but mostly there were letters.
The now lost art of letter writing
was undertaken with such regularity,
sometimes urgency.

I was determined to be ruthless,
to only keep things of significance to me,
in order to reduce the hoard.
There were cards for every occasion,
written with such heartfelt messages.
I examined each one carefully
before putting it on one side.
But the letters took time, some hard to decipher;
written in pencil or coloured ink that assaults the eyes,
some on almost tissue like paper.
Letters my parents wrote to each other
when just married, cruelly separated by war.



The hours passed,
reading and sorting,
reading and sorting.

In a brown envelope, carefully preserved
for eighty years and more, a cache of love letters,
intense, beautifully written and impossible to discard.
Yet I don't know the sender.

At last the case was empty,
it's contents ordered into separate piles.
I picked up a wallet, two photos,
my parents, staring out at me
not smiling, but looking straight ahead,
a requirement for travel concessions.
It was only then I broke down.
Fragments of their lives tidied away into box files.

Vivien Foulkes-James



Clocks

Locked down
Locked up
Blinds the prison bars within which we dwell
In the streets today
The quiet called
As many feathered carrion cawed
No rubbish
No bother
Nature finally unsmothered
Whilst we watch the clocks
Biding time
Our static hands
Matching idle minds
As time slowly,
but surely,
unwinds.

T.F. Webb

Afterwards

Wishing away the hours as days merge into one, this
hiatus in my life goes on and on and on,
Eventually though, this time must pass,
normal life, of sorts, will recommence.

And now we say 'before all this' meaning,
living without restrictions when we had freedom,
living without the unseen threat, the virus in our midst.

Tied to home as never before,
how could I ever have thought it an
indulgence to see family or friends,
see a film or go for a drive?

I now exist in a virtual world,
shying away from everything that's real.

Once the threat abates will I have changed?
Viewing everyone through a veil of suspicion,
ever cautious of a close encounter,
reclusive, always maintaining my distance.

Vivien Foulkes James

Lockdown

Avoid covid close contact, unless it's in the supermarket,
panic-buying things that you do not need until you're
swimming in a sea of lemsip, isolate yourself in your bedroom,
lock all of the doors, let no-one in, stare at your device, you'd
better think twice, count your blessings and repent for your
sins,

,cause if the devil comes knocking you'll be first to go, praying
for God to be on your side, but if he doesn't exist and it is just
this then cut your losses, run and hide,

We're on lockdown, see the fear in your eyes,

we're on lockdown, and a mask of disguise,

we're on lockdown, you'd better run and hide,

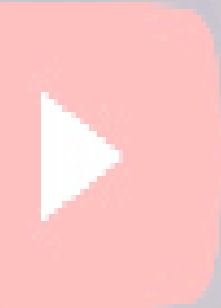
behind locked doors, stockpiled sky high,

The end could be nigh for the sins of man, or a tin foil hat
population plan, a climate change prevention extension from
extinction, you don't have a clue, phone your loved ones, do
not hold them close, for a kiss or a hug could be a lethal dose,
but make sure that you still go to work, so the economy don't
collapse,

and if the devil comes knocking you'll be first to go, praying
for God to be on your side, but if he doesn't exist and it is just
this then cut your losses, run and hide,

We're on lockdown, see the fear in your eyes,
we're on lockdown, and a mask of disguise,
we're on lockdown, you'd better run and hide,
behind locked doors, stockpiled sky high,

Run and hide



We're on lockdown, see the fear in your eyes,
we're on lockdown, and a mask of disguise,
we're on lockdown, you'd better run and hide,
behind locked doors, stockpiled sky high,

We're on lockdown, see the fear in your eyes,
we're on lockdown, and a mask of disguise,
we're on lockdown, you'd better run and hide,
behind locked doors, stockpiled sky high,

We're on lockdown.

Laurie Wright

Lockdown Diary

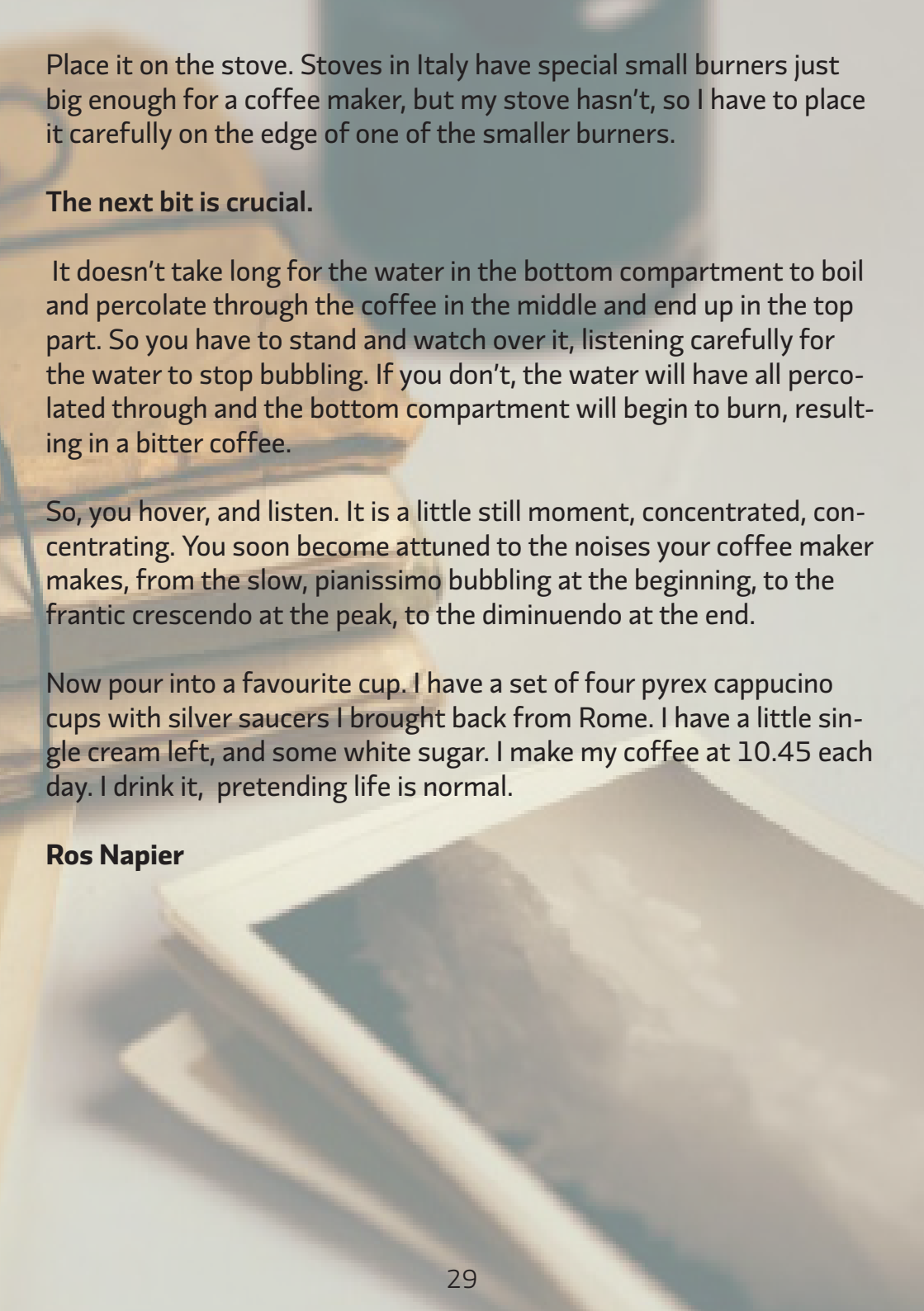
“One café put up a notice: The best protection is a bottle of good wine.” Camus “The Plague.”

I have bought some good wine. I have bought wine from all the places I will not visit this year: a serious Bordeaux from where my French family are in a serious lockdown, two bottles of lively Txaxoli from the Basque country, a dependable Rioja, two scented bottles of Rose from Provence, some exuberant Chianti and a Sicilian Primitivo that releases its secrets slyly, and a rare bottle of fizz: a Franciacorta, from plague-riven Lombardy. I will drink them, alone, and remember all those places. I Will remember the sun in Bordeaux, and the embraces of my cousins, and the rain on the sea in San Sebastian, and the velvet nights of Tuscany. When all this is over, I will open the bottles of Franciacorta, and share them with my family, and we will say: “All is well, tutto va bene.”

Making coffee.

As soon as I knew we were going to be holed up I bought a coffee maker. It is an old fashioned stovetop espresso maker, shiny silver, with three compartments and a lid that sticks and is difficult to get off. I knew I wanted to make coffee every morning, as a consolation for all those meetings at coffee places I was going to miss. I didnt want a machine you have to plug in, I wanted something old fashioned, simple .

This is what you do: Put just enough water in the bottom compartment for a cup of coffee. Carefully measure two teaspoonsful of hoarded ground coffee in to the middle compartment and put it on top of the bottom one. Push the top compartment on, then the lid, stiffly.



Place it on the stove. Stoves in Italy have special small burners just big enough for a coffee maker, but my stove hasn't, so I have to place it carefully on the edge of one of the smaller burners.

The next bit is crucial.

It doesn't take long for the water in the bottom compartment to boil and percolate through the coffee in the middle and end up in the top part. So you have to stand and watch over it, listening carefully for the water to stop bubbling. If you don't, the water will have all percolated through and the bottom compartment will begin to burn, resulting in a bitter coffee.

So, you hover, and listen. It is a little still moment, concentrated, concentrating. You soon become attuned to the noises your coffee maker makes, from the slow, pianissimo bubbling at the beginning, to the frantic crescendo at the peak, to the diminuendo at the end.

Now pour into a favourite cup. I have a set of four pyrex cappucino cups with silver saucers I brought back from Rome. I have a little single cream left, and some white sugar. I make my coffee at 10.45 each day. I drink it, pretending life is normal.

Ros Napier

Discontent and Fortitude

Not far from here there lived a woman who once wanted to be a man.

She could see clearly, as she said to her cat, 'Men have the better deal'.

The cat looked back at her and shrugged his fur and yawned.

The woman got up late each morning - there was no need to get out of bed early. Each day began the same and the cat looked back at her and turned around.

She got up late and went across to the mirror in the bathroom and stared.

'You're not a bit like a man', said the cat in his stare.

She looked, and hated what she saw: her hair, her skin, her nose, her two small eyes - everything about her lacked a point.

'Pointless', she said - 'if I were a man I wouldn't care. I would have a purpose and a role to play'.

'Of course', the cat narrowed a look and washed.

Every day she thought of washing - but what was the point.

'If I were a man I could smell manly and that would be a virile healthy sweat. But as a woman I just have embarrassing monthly smells, and womanly stinks'.

'Too true', purred her cat, 'just so' and settled his nose to his tail.

Around mid-morning the woman had had enough of her sweaty bed, she pulled on the same loose joggers as yesterday and the day before and the day before that - and then chose an even bigger baggy top to hide in.

'You know you can't hide', looked the cat. 'Everyone can see you've got fat breasts and an arse the size of Australia'.

She went to kick - but the cat sprang to the top of the wardrobe and looked down on her. He looked down, as she looked down, on her pathetic, female, useless self.

Another day locked up in her body went fast and slowly by. She ate. And

the cat ate demanding food between sleeps.

She stared out of the window at the rain, and chewed a strand of hair. She thought, 'If I were a man I could shave my square cut jaw, slick back my short cut hair, and admire my reflection'.

The cat looked.

Too soon came the night. The dark encircled the house. The door remained chained and the post unopened. The woman, curled in her chair, nursed her head, the glass beside her empty again, unfulfilled.

Then the cat sauntered by flaunting his tail, stretching his paws, and he said archly, 'A full open woman like yourself would make a perfect human being. Stop wanting something or other. Just be'.

Later the woman washed her face, stretched, unlocked, and went out.

The moon burned like a headlight. She licked her lips, her eyes widened, something in the bushes moved. There was a smell she recognised, she tensed.

'Sorry', the voice called, 'Just putting out the rubbish!'

'Me too', she half lied.

He came forward. Thin as a whistle with a sleek mouth that bled as if singing.

'How's it going?' He asked.

She shrugged.

'Do you ever wish you were someone else in another time and body?'

He asked.

She half smiled. She threw back, 'Do you?'

'Oh it's alright for women', he said.

'You've just got to be there'.

The cat in the background looked up and twitched his tail, then interjected 'The trouble is that you think too much. We animals can't tell what we are, unless we sniff and lift our tails. We just wear our fur, unknowing and uncaring how we look'.

The cat had a point.

The man and the woman stood.

'I like that top', he said, 'it suits you - do you think it would suit me?'

'I'll give you the name of the outlet', she said, 'sure it's comfortable - you'd look good'.

'I'd maybe get it in a different colour', he said.

'Sure', she said, 'please yourself, treat yourself'.

'Nice talking!' They said simultaneously, 'see you around'. And they smiled identical smiles.

The cat tensed, lashed his tail, pricked his ears, hesitated, then sprang.

Maggy Markworthy

Blitz E15

NUMBER 42, 1940

Take the hair in one hand
And, neat as ninepence,
Twist and secure.
Slide the pin into the pleat
Silky and smooth.
Easy does it.

The mirror slithers
To the bedroom floor,
Grinning like a clown.
She frowns at the sudden empty wall.
Snick-snack go the blades of glass
Slicing her dress
Her petticoat, her hand,
Neat as a surgeon.

The house settles its fractured frame,
Irritable as a muzzled dog.
Down the shattered stairs, hobbled
By heels, to the smoking hall.
A bed on the dining table,
Hospital corners intact
Beneath its blanket of dust.



The boy raises a plaster face
To the sky above his head.
'What larks, sis! Where's Ma?'
'At the factory. Thank God.
We'd better shift.' Shift
And twist out into
The rubbled street.

Sitting on the stumps
Of long-gone railings,
She feels the garden wall
Wet through shredded poplin,
Until a passing warden
Stops. And gasps.

'Christ! Fred, this one's bad.'
Tender as a lover, he lifts her,
Weightless, body weeping,
Face down on a stretcher.
While, in the distance,
The boy calls her name.
'Easy does it.'

Hilary Spiers

NUMBER 17, 1940

In the garden, bruised apples
Gape with wasp-burrows, sweet with rot.
The crumbled walls bleed into earth
Soured by resentful London light.
Thin blades of bone beneath
The homemade dress, she fingers
A discarded doll, sightless eyes
Bright with unshed tears.
Her absent daughters scream,
Soft limbs entwined round hips
That ache with emptiness.
The bedroom holds a drift
Of sweat and love,
A pile of childish letters
Bubbling with delight
At hedges, livestock, horizons
Wild with wonder.
'Don't you worry, Mrs P,
They'll be right as rain, you'll see.'
The angry sky convulses, sheds
Its deadly silver drops.
In Devon, rain falls soft as silk
Upon her wide-eyed girls.

Hilary Spiers



Verbosity: A tale of words

2020. Black lives matter. Jesus was not white. Stuck in doors, locked down. Coronavirus. Pandemic. Covid-19. A madman shouting his mouth off: The China. Chinese Flu. Chinese Plague. Kung Flu. The gift from China.

“So, I said to my people slow the testing down. Testing is frankly over-rated.”

Fake news. Highest number of deaths in the world. Wash Your Hands.

“Stop counting. Counting increases the numbers.”

African-Americans. I can't breathe. Build that wall. Drink or inject bleach. Misinformation. Freedom of speech. Unprecedented times. Positive testing. Increased cases. New out-break. 111. Contactless. Less contact. No contact.

Pasta panic. No toilet rolls. Road-side drop off. Wash your hands. Face coverings. High risk. Clinically vulnerable. Extremely clinically vulnerable. A-symptomatic. Herd immunity. Get it over with. Solidarity. No Justice. No Peace. No mass protests. Keep your distance. Walk, cycle or drive. Working from home. Don't go to work. Go to work. No commuting. Avoid public transport. Wash your hands. Doctors closed. Universities closed. Libraries Closed. Shops closed. Restaurants closed. Banks closed. Cash-less society. On-line surgery. On-line courses. Virtual tutorials. Increased on-line library resources. Students stressed out:

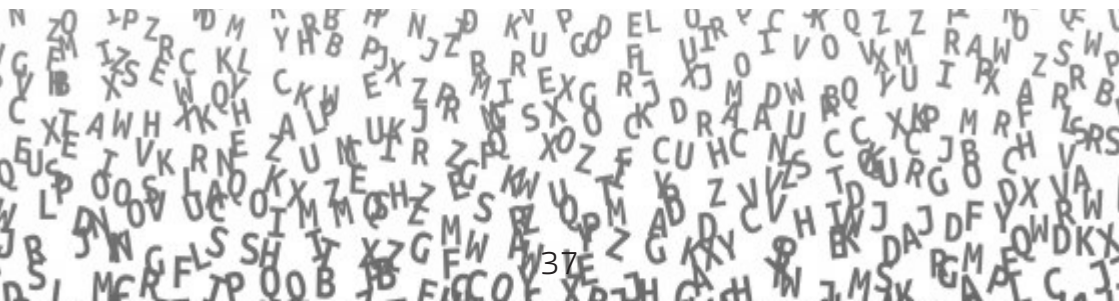
“They want to go back to actual lecture rooms. They want to be in-person with their TA's and the professors, learning in-person.”

Avoid mass gatherings. PPE. ICU bed shortage. Test and Trace. Track and Trace. Click and Collect. At 'High risk' letter from the NHS. Moderate risk. Risk of Transmission. B.A.M.E. Stay Home. Save Lives. Do not leave home if you or someone you live with has any of the following: a high temperature, a new continuous cough, a loss of, or change to your sense of smell or taste. Staycation. Fourteen-day quarantine. Air bridges. Traffic lights. Travel corridors. Sanitisers. 70+ Wash your hands. Twenty seconds or happy birthday twice. Illegal parties. Do not meet friends or family not from your own household. Groups of six. Family and Friends. Support Bubbles. Elbow-to-elbow. Take a knee. Eight minutes and forty-six seconds. Animals and Thugs. Schools closed. Schools Open. Schools Closed. No Vaccine. I can't breathe. Unyielding knee. Symptomatic. Thursdays 20:00 BST. Happy Clapping. NHS 72nd Anniversary. Unfairly disadvantaged. Deprived. Disparity. Occupation. Ethnicity. Inequality. Agism. Sexism. Location. Obamacare. National Health Service staff get the clap every week. Memes go viral. Wash Your Hands. All carers and essential service providers also get the clap every week. Collective gratitude. Mass incarceration. Isolation. Self-isolation. Two metres apart. Self-shielding. Social distancing. Masks. I can't breathe. Asphyxiated.

Second Spike. Taking liberties. Flouting social distancing. Mingling too much. Not observing isolation. Crapping on the beach. Drive-ins. Queues. Virtual Football. Zoom. And Gloom. Exercise in the park. Exercise on-line. Digital infrastructure for the long-term.

"You've been Furloughed!"

Kashmir Tutt



Rhetoric Clap

They told us to stand on the doorstep and clap
wring our hands, shake our heads sincerely –
for the health service we hold so dearly
so the blusterer looks like a decent chap
with rhetorical skills he has used to entrap
with the language of battle and victory,
so the masses don't notice the irony
and when it all falls apart, they'll be
blaming victims, in barefaced hypocrisy.

Eithne Cullen



Acknowledgements and Credits

Photos and Paintings:

Cover - Propekt oil on canvas painting by Hope & Mania

Introduction - Its a Gas painting by Hope & Mania

Seen from a bus after lockdown - Untitled painting by Hope & Mania

Endurance, Wisdom, Discontent and Fortitude

- Fields and Stuff painting by Hope & Mania

The Grief Butterfly - still taken from the animation. Produced by Cardboard Zebra Creative with artwork by Hope & Mania

Lockdown - still taken from the music video by Laurie Wright

Other pictures from licensed stock photos

HEARTH

© 2022 The Hearth Centre

thehearthcentre.org.uk