

Virtual Sempervivum 2020

Embracing Uncertainty

Anthology

Written between 4th and 11th April during the first “virtual” Sempervivum
Easter gathering

KEN FISHER

Death

A sack of dust. He carries the sack.
He cracks his knuckles. His knuckles crack.
His bony face, his lack of surprise.
His nose is a hole, his empty eyes.
He turns to me now, creaking bones on the chair.
He shows me the sack, he says "Despair"
He says "It's all dust", he says "Give in"
He says "What's the point?" He says "No win".
My flesh falls away, I say "Bone to bone!"
I say "Give it up, Death!", I say "Go on home!"
"I'll sit in your chair, I'll cackle and cheer. I'll dance on my grave, I'll grin ear to ear."

SALLY FREEDMAN

1

Easter 2020

The may is out, white and starry,
Black spurs lurking.
A world encircled by thorny challenge
Raises its voice to the skies,
Seeking assurance from absent gods.

2

Ambulance

The garden blooms
With lilies and birdsong.
A siren sounds and our lives change.

3

Smile

In a world of unknowns
Your smile squeezes my heart,
Allowing glad tears.

4

Question. (a response to Wendell Berry poem)

Man thrusts and cuts through wood and water,
Mangles godgiven gifts and tears to shreds
The very air.
Our greed may destroy us,
How will we survive?
Whatever the question,
Nature has the answer.

5 Social Isolation - a wee story.

A sunny Monday with the wind dancing my line of washing, I feasted my eyes on a banquet of waving flowers. Purple, blue and bright gold, they sprang from cascades of powerful shining green.

I was bustling, bristling with a need to clean, tidy and clear the decks for who knew what? Disinfectants, bleach and absolute hygiene were all being recommended by the government to keep us alive at this time plague. Covid 19 was an unforgiving virus we were told, especially for older people.

Bin at the front gate overflowing, I was trying to pack more in when a man with his dog approached. "Hello" said this complete stranger gruffly, keeping up his pace, facing his direction of travel, eyes focused on the pavement ahead of him.

"Hello. Lovely day!" I said

I saw him nod briefly as he disappeared down the road. All of it mattered and had new meaning.



JUSTIN KENRICK

Pandemic poems.

1.

Spacious the sand
where lovers,
dogs and children play.

A world of sudden Sundays
dips its huge lazy sky
into a brimful shimmering sea.

We take care of each other
by staying apart

2.

Beyond the city
the hills

beyond the clouds
the sky

beyond the doing
the being.

Seeping in
down silent streets

unchartered waters
of eery calm.



JANE LEWIS

Uncertainties

In a pandemic 5/4/20

I don't know which bird will sing first tomorrow morning from the pear tree
but I know the open-throated song of tiny Wren and Robin's trill

I don't know how many clouds it takes to raise a storm,
but I can smell the soft animal of rain before the drops fall

I don't know the weight of salt in the sea,
but I know the sticky feel of salty skin after my morning swim

I don't know where the gritty, grinding thoughts go,
but I know the sound of my morning sit

I don't know the date of my own death,
but I know the humble rise and fall of each tumbling breath

Wash your hands

Pandemic truths 6/04/20

Yesterday I washed my hands 22 times
Soapy bubbles and hot, hot water,
rubbing every cell,
scrubbing under every nail

But old grandfather death
will not dissolve in the lather,
or flow in a gentle swirl;
down the plug-hole

And we cannot wash away
the scars of forests felled
or wash the carbon from the air,
or wash the sea plastic free

Soap and water will not mend degraded soil
or calm the hype of economic growth,
or make our power fossil free

We cannot wash the gap between rich and poor,
or wash new trees into the forest floor,
or wash out our greed seeking more and more
Soap and water will not house those on the streets,
or allow angry minds to meet
or soothe women as they greet

Yesterday I washed my hands 22 times
Soapy bubbles and hot, hot water,
rubbing every cell,
scrubbing under every nail

But old grandfather death
will not dissolve in the lather,
or flow in a gentle swirl;
down the plug-hole

Where did the hope go?

8/04/20

Where did the hope go?
It went to the kale and carrot and courgette,
lifting hands from the dark earth
in silent prayer

Where did the hope go?
It went to the wren and redstart and robin,
weaving songs
round the budding willow

Where did the hope go?
It went to the birch and beech and blackthorn,
Unfurling shiny leaves
to the growing sun

Where did the hope go?
It went to the pear and plum and cherry,
blossoming
for the bees





JOHN MOLLESON

LOCKDOWN

I've been here before. Three times, not counting a couple of weeks playing poker, struck down by Asian flu in a smitten boarding school in the 50s.

Uganda under Idi Amin was distinctly curtailed. No going out at night, drive with your car doors locked (bad guys could jump in at the lights- so don't stop at lights!), close Wazungu ranks and keep yourself to yourself. In the end we got out of the country raggedy, how we could. The Asians had a much harder time as they left for a new life in the new world. They and their stuff were deliberately targeted. I remember a cheery chappie, happily smashing up some Asian's belongings as I delivered my goods to the airport for shipping, explaining to me that not to worry- my stuff would be just fine. 'I wasn't one of them'. It was, and, certainly, I was not.

And The Solomons became increasingly restricted as the year went on. 4% of all whites were killed one month (by then there was about a hundred of us and 4 got killed- for various reasons). At this point the Australians pulled all their folk out – gone were the lovely medical volunteers from Sydney's St Jan's Hospital who manned our local Hospital on a 6 month rotation. Note to self to not get sick. The Brits ordered us not to go to some of the really baddie islands- Malaita, and the adventure of travel became a much bigger adventure altogether. Pacific Islanders are well suited for these conditions, building a massive contingency into any endeavour. A 'Makera funeral' was a term recognising that any trip, eg to attend a funeral on a distant island (custom obligation) may extend from an expected 6 days to perhaps six months or so. A one day shopping trip lasted a week for me due to a storm. A one week teaching practice visit lasted a fascinating two due to the planes running out of fuel.

I was also born into a war and all the mindset that implies. 'Is your journey really necessary?' 'Don't you know there's a war on?' I learned early about hoarding (bad), and making do (good). Private cars were up on bricks for 'the duration' to save their tyres. You just didn't have the petrol to go anywhere. Travel was restricted with no question of long distance holidays. I have to say that I suspect my childhood was the better for many of these measures. We eat better, were more active --I would walk miles before I was five, because there was no option and we were enterprising. We also had an awareness of where we fitted into the world, knew who our friends were and took little for granted.

Will we be able to recover these virtues this time round? I watch with interest, aware that my eyes and ears on the world are highly partial.

It is worth noting that I didn't have a telephone in any of these situations, let alone all the social media paraphernalia now at our disposal. News came by wireless, at 9 o'clock during the war, listened to

standing given the appalling content, or by bush telegraph, literally in the case of Uganda. We learned about Obote's overthrow by the drumming all around us- a primal, skin-tingling experience in the humid black embrace of a tropical night after only a month in country. In all cases you needed to be clear with whom to make a common sense and how to stay solution focussed. Rumour and emotion were quicksand to be avoided. This time round we have emails, texts, WhatsApp, zoom, Facebook, two kinds of phone, skype, jitsi, and 130 tv channels to confuse and clarify us. We share our anxieties and understandings on webinars and zoom and feel connected to our reference groups. Are we clear and confident that we shall take the right action in all circumstances? . There are uncertainties- how long will this last? Into what kind of world will we exit? Are we prepared to face the even greater challenge of climate change?



LUCI RANSOME

Love + Uncertainty x Play = Being Fully Alive

This is what I woke up feeling
L O V E

For our connection last night
For our community last night
For our compassion last night

I'm actively learning, now more than ever, to embrace what is, what's right in front of me, what I take for granted because of my new uncertainties

Coronavirus has given me that additional shove to enter zones of curiosity and wonder in my impermanence, and all my reality

What I could do before that I can't do now
What I could do before and still can I'm doing even more

With greater curiosity and wonder I

take longer walks, where I stumble across a dead sheep and meditate on its life and death behind a blooming yellow gorse bush

realise Ken is very susceptible to this virus
and that I'm aware of his growing groundedness in this world where previously spirit had been his home

snatch the blunt edges of grass green wind
pulsing samba style under my nose

Sometimes near death or loss can heighten what there is, bittersweet gratitude, right now
And then that right now has disappeared

Was life ever as predictable as it was pre virus
with medical advancements to prolong death
in order to have everything 'now or tomorrow'
at the latest
to keep consuming a predictable life predictably
Everything's possible at a cost

Was life ever as unpredictable as it was pre virus
scratching below the surfaces of illusory control and permanence and predictability and monotony and sameness and privilege

What is being alive if not the joy of play
and flirting in and out and around
the edges of ones precious life?

Have a life
Be a life
Love a life
Love lives
Loving lives
Loving moments
Loving preciousness
Loving fragility
Loving uncertainty
Loving play
Loving my life
Loving all life
Loving all
Loving
Love

When reasons for doing
fall away, I relax
when meaning in being
rises up
I play



Mask Making

I need nourishment today
from the big smoke
that half dead entity which
lures my fearful gut

So I'm making personal protection that's
as safe as I can
as good as anything
as far as I know

I need nourishment today
from the big smoke
that half dead entity which
always lures my fearful gut

So instead I'm creating a haven of abundance that's
as close to home as I can
more vibrant than anything
extending warmth and imagination
as far as I feel

I need nourishment today
from the big blue expanse
that vibrant portal which
welcomes all of my self

MONICA RUSHFORTH

Visiting a French chateau. 1948.

I am staying with my Swiss godmother in Zurich having no memory of having met her before but making herself known to me by sending presents of silver cutlery at Christmas and easter eggs which were always arrived full of hares with shattered ears. But to the envy of my siblings, they were Mine, to be shared when I deemed it appropriate. She had disappeared all the war years. It being an uncomfortable time till she suddenly announces ' Today we are going to France to visit old friends.'

After a three hours drive we arrive at a small ruined French chateau, much pockmarked by the war. We are greeted by our host Le Conte de Cazelle. He is a dapper little man, stout and white suited with red bow tie. His wife had striped black and white hair, like Cruella de Ville, silent till she spoke to the white poodle on her knee, feeding it from her plate at the table, saying "tout petit, tout petit." Her sister has orange hair, is dressed in mauve, a dress much too big for her, likewise silent, in contrast to the host was specks nonstop. We are served a sumptuous five course meal by a servant of uncertain gender until we hear him addressed as Joseph. Come bedtime we find that each room leads out of the next and there is only one light switch operated by monsieur. My godmother then slips silently into my room to dowse my bed with bug killer.

Come the morning we are taken for a tour of the policies accompanied by a very smelly billy goat to whom our host calls out "Ecoute, Augoust, tu exagere, Ecoute Augoust, Tu exagere. "

1

Water drips down from above,
It could take me where I want to go.
Already I feel the thrill of movement
While scudding over the waves,
Feel the ache of my legs, my arms.
I am watched by another, as blue as 'I will be
If, in error I crash down on the shore.
"Blue bird" I will say, "Will you fly beside me.
Guide my movements,
Till I arrive safely on the other shore.

2

The future remains obscure,
We wait, we hope,
Then escape into the present
With images of avocets on the seashore,
Herons among the rushes.
Be still, let the question rest.
One day, we will walk along into an answer
And know what the future will be.



CHRIS SCHOECK

• **Trees during Coronavirus Times**

Around the world the trees have heard, the news has spread.

From tiny city garden, to fragrant grove, to still remaining ever-smaller forests,

Our news has spread

around the world.

Each tree shudders, sharing human pain.

Each day anew they listen

and wish us well.

Waving in the wind, they do not bear a grudge,

they do not judge.

CARINA SPINK

Embracing uncertainty

Fear

Fear of catching Covid 19 fear of being one of the unlucky ones who becomes seriously ill
Fear of dying
Fear of passing it on to my family
Fear of seeing patients with Covid 19 fear of letting them down

Frustration

Frustration at some of the responses reported
Frustration at the lack of knowledge
Frustration at trying to do our best is portrayed as giving up on the elderly

Disconcerted

Disconcerted by change at work, hardly seeing anyone, telephone assessment, RED room ready ,
updating records of those at higher risk without needing consent

Connection

Unable to see Daughter and granddaughter but in more contact with video messaging, whats app is
wonderful
Watching 2040 through connecting to an XR group in Hackney via Zoom
Tweet of Rebecca, my final year medical student one year ago working on a Covid 19 ward

Inspiration

From talking to older patients they do understand and are ready for whatever happens
Ready to take on isolation
Ready to make their wishes clear Advance Directive Respect form

Beauty

Beauty in the world around Spring emerging
Foraging for wild garlic and seaweed
Delicious meals shared with family

Opportunity

Opportunity for a better future where real needs will have priority over financial gain and growth



LINDSEY STEWART

Isolation, Day 9

Eyes, like magnifiers, watching, feasting.

Fish swim inside the paperweight beside me,
turquoise, fiery orange, pink and purple.
Their company, a sea plant of deepest blue,
yellow and gold, leaves like butterfly wings.
I join them for a while.

I turn my eye. A coffee pot. Beads of
silvery water play on the steamy glass
like excited children. The cup, empty
now. The brown liquid, my morning treat,
never before quite this sweet.
I join the party for a while.

Pottery parrot, beak open, wobbly eye
like a shuffling man moving stiffly to nowhere.
Yet those colours still bright. Orange, yellow,
blue, like the fish in their glass prison.
You nestle among the stones.
I choose to move away.

Photograph. I stare into my mother's face.
Our eyes meet, hers are shining.
A small bird of prey rests on her gloved
hand. Still and silent, another shining eye.
Old and young together in harmony.
I stay for a while.

Time. A second, a minute, an hour mark
only a change in mood, a shifting sand
of bewildered thoughts, crashing together
like demented bees. I breathe slowly
watching the tree through the window.
I have to stay.

EDWARD TYLER

The Runner stops

Runner, exhilarated

Feels the burn-limit placed by body

And slows

Limbs full of delicious fatigue

After burst of growth

World brought to stop

By tiniest of Trojan horses

Bag of proto-life becoming life only in our cells

We are invited to halt, as if by a

Wise, knowing guide

To look at our immediate

Bountiful surroundings

Get to know our place and neighbours

Grow new aspects of our

Mirroring

Pacing selves

Ground ourselves in

Higher ground

Of hearth, heart and home



Possible Blue

Mad juggernaut of wind

Making being outside nearly not possible fearing

Judgement

Night of nearfull moon presiding over veiled clouds

Drops a fine and strange dust

So

Next day in hidden glen robin sings

Trees yawn stretch shed

Pollen

Blue-tits crochet a way with their beak-needles

Dotting up the willow branch so I look

Into

Sky

How its tone

Deepens

Toward overhead

Turning a blue I never noticed but now

Exists