

POETS RESPOND TO THE PANDEMIC



Jeanie Tomanek, "Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief"
Courtesy of the Artist and The Loft

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COMPASSION

Compassion (Palm Sunday, 2020)

by Diane Walker

We hold in our hearts a prayer
For all who walk alone; for all the vulnerable;
For all the church doors, once open, now closed;
For those who've died, and for all the ones who loved them;
For all the ones still working to serve,
And all the ones who now are unemployed;
For all the colors, slowly being leached
Out of a world awash in grief:
We no longer wave our palms,
We simply wash them,
Over,
And over.

FAITH

Zojaj: Ameer

by Sheikha A.

*the ground is rumbling/the air abuzz/with crashing water energies/
while the midnight skies above/salute it all — with silent cries of love
~ Tighe O'Donoghue Ross*

Niqaab-less dusk has found its beyond,
I show my face for its fissured beauty
without the need for layers; close to
the hand bearing *Kauthar*, night birds
have confused the light for morning.
Silencers have been stripped off
this body, and I cannot robe this skin
with linens of secrets — the resilience
I wore — as I appear not the way earth
covered every sown intent; I appear
as glass through which light breaks
and scatters in true form; I appear
above shadows, my caravans of cloaks
heavy velvet of pledges. These hands
will burn the ferocity of light through
its skin and will scab like rainbows
curving over skies. When your hand
will be raised to the direction of trees,
I will know the way to the shade of *Tooba*.

Note: This poem was written in collaboration with the artist Tighe O'Donoghue/Ross and responds to his painting "The Prophecy/The Cascade", which follows.



Tighe O'Donoghue/Ross, *The Prophecy/The Cascade*, 2019

Abide with Me, March 2020

by Judith Sornberger

Bumped up against and overlapping one another,
it's hard to tell one painted turtle's olive-tiled
carapace from another's. For a moment,
I see only a mound of glaring sunlight
balanced on the log across Marsh Creek.

When they reposition, I can count six
through my binoculars. I know it's ridiculous
to think they huddle like this from affection—
a family reunited after months half-frozen
and alone, sunk in deep mud.

It's these pandemic times, I know,
laying a new lens over everything—
times that forbid touch beyond the shell
of home. Passing the occasional other
on this path, I call *hello*, our distance
an embrace of what we hope for each other.

A choir of peepers joins us, singing Spring.
In tune, unlike the voices of my congregation
during our Zoom worship this morning,
struggling to join each other from the square
cells of our onscreen faces. *Abide with Me*,
we warbled, wandering from the path of melody
and stumbling back, time after time,
as if our lives depended on this closeness.

Other Associated Words

Community, Hope, Love, Renewal, Resilience, Solace, Spirit/Spiritual

FAMILY

Post-it Notes to Grandma Ruth During the Pandemic

by Judith Sornberger

At fifteen, getting my learner's permit
like all my friends, driving Dad's baby
blue '65 Lancer, I barely noticed you in
my rear-view mirror learning to drive in
your sixties, shocking the old ladies on
your block. In my love beads, flashing
peace signs, I'd believed I was the rebel.

If you weren't dead, I'd ask you to teach
me again to crochet as when you showed
me how to loop pearly yellow yarn around
a hook and into tiny granny squares for my
unwed girlfriend's baby, as though it might
make her immune to need or sorrow. I know
I could find a tutorial online, but that wouldn't
bring your warm thigh or your bowed head
close to mine as we recovered some of the
world's softness in this time of pandemic.

Did you hear? Driving home from
somewhere yesterday, I caught
myself whistling hymns the way
you did—head tilting side to side
with the melody—a plump little
chickadee tweeting Abide with
Me. You were always trying to lure
me back into the flock. Is it too late
to pray you might have seen me?

Other Associated Words

Remembrance, Healing, Sheltering, Courage

FEAR

The Homeward Dove

by Lorna Cahall

she's so weary
flying over the folded masked faces
so tired
can't stand to look back
at flashing lights
all the wrong turns
please, please
don't lose me
running, running behind you
both chasing the fading
sunlight
and when the night closes in
all together
waiting for moonlight
all together
weary, so weary
the homeward dove

Other Associated Words

Family, Sheltering

Knowing in a Time of Fear

by Marc Harshman

A fall of blossom in a sudden breeze
and, like snow shaken from a limb,
you shiver with what you've carried
here from the headlines
and bow your head.

You know you should know better.

The river sluices its cold way down the mountain
between cracked, gray panels of stone,
the canyon deafening with its mad roar.
The loneliness here moves the earth below you
and you grab hold of the slenderest branch,
a whippet of cherry and suddenly
the whole forest is holding you up.
But, you knew this, didn't you?

On your knees amid the clutter of your study,
a crucifix on one wall, the Stones' Hot Lips
on another, and a window framing
the pink haze of maples eager
to get on with the business of spring.
Your eyes fill with something neither sad nor
joyous, something like thanksgiving
that someone, call Her or Him, God
or not, but you know
there is this great
listening gathered all around you.

Even as the dark mysteries of the day
assail your locked doors, your neighborhood,
your world, there is this listening much like
Julian in her cell centuries ago
hearing that convincing voice
and knowing that all will be
out of our hands but well
enough, and more
to see us to the other side

be that eternity, next year,
or simply this next second,
the one where we hear
another's heart beat just like ours.

Doctors say lost sense of smell may be clue to coronavirus

by Drew Myron

So I smelled all the bad things
just to make sure I still could:
 urine in the nursing home hall
 the stove's seeping flame
 potatoes spoiling in the back drawer
 a sweat-soaked shirt
 old beer in a back seat
 hair tangled in a blow dryer
 broccoli cooking
 bag balm
 a damp basement
 burnt popcorn
 dog turds on fresh grass
 a forest on fire
 morning breath
 the stench of a stranded whale

 my fear.

HEALING

Essential

by Laura Boggess

I told him I want to see
 redbud blooming
 water trickling
 bird song in flight

so we enter the wood at the
edge of the neighborhood

here, leaf-strewn spoors and
light-soaked cathedrals calm the
memory of left behind sterile
corridors and empty wait-rooms—
along with the N95 hanging behind
my office door

it's business as usual at Charleston
General.

in the afternoon, I sit with a patient and
he covers the hole in his neck with one
finger so he can speak—a makeshift
tracheostomy plug

suddenly, I am aware of where my
hands have been, where my feet have
walked, what my breath has touched; sweat
misting around the edges of my mask

but now, the red tape of telehealth
drifts away into the insistent pink of
the redbud trees. we sit under a
copse; swaying branches filter sunlight
over our shoulders. a black-capped
chickadee calls to his lover. the wind
stirs the canopy of blossoms above us

there are crimson petals everywhere.

HOPE

Hope: April 2020

by Marjorie Maddox Hafer

“Hope is the thing with feathers...”
Emily Dickinson

A “thing,” perhaps,
 and fowl,
 but bloody-
 plucked,
 dipped in disease
 and plummeting,
the sky-high yours/mine
 violently de-plumed,
bald as a vulture,
 fickle flight undone
in this freefall frenzy of fear
to doom
 become dust
 become

what we don’t know
 become
before
 and void
become dark, become
 the dawn crack
of Eden on replay
and maybe—hope against hope—
 become
the “warm breasts, bright wings”
 of Spirit hovering,
 warming,
readying its weary-
 world nest
 once-again
 for wings.

Other Associated Words

Faith, Fear, Spirit/Spiritual

Van Gogh's 'Spring Garden'

by Martha Silano

It's called "Spring Garden," but it doesn't look like one. More like an empty lot,
where there used to be a laundromat or gas station, a playground
but the swings have been hauled away.

It's called "Spring Garden," but there's no pink or blue pastel.
A fence-like row of gnarled sticks: more like a graveyard
beneath oppressive gray.

It can't be a garden: the title must be a mistake. Someone in a long, black coat
slinks past like they don't want to be seen, let alone painted;
like they'd hoped to pass without notice.

Sneaking into a "garden" to do what? Visit a loved one too poor to afford
a headstone? To bury a body? Or was it just before he pulled
from his pocket a packet of seeds? Maybe, it's early spring—

too soon for daffodils and tulips, no sign of the growth to come;
maybe the soot-brown church is not a dreary symbol,
and the trees are green but the light

is turning them hazel. Maybe it's all been sowed. And Look! A few tufts
of bright yellow grass, a bush in the foreground, aflame with—
blossoms? An awfully dark red but flowers, nonetheless.

Note: An image of van Gogh's painting is provided at the end of this document.

LOSS

Social Safety Net

by Maureen E. Doallas

Evilin, 33, New York City

They tell me not to bother
to come in for testing.

Undocumented, I gasp
for air.

*

Juan, 36, Berkeley, California

Last Friday, my boss shut
the restaurant's doors.

I'm in shock. I was afraid
to go to work,

but now, I don't know what
to do.

My 9-year-old has asthma.

*

[Name Withheld], 36, Ohio

A migrant worker, I plant
tomatoes, onions, other produce.

I have no gloves, no masks,
no soap, no running water.

I bring soap from home.
I wash my hands with my drink-

ing water.
My boss no longer takes

my temperature.

*

Lydia, 41, Boston

I lack papers. I'm terrified
of my commute — two hours,

two trains, a bus — to my job.
I take care

of an 86-year-old man.

When you get sick, they tell us,
go to the hospital.

I don't have health insurance.

~

Jerry, 54, Husband of Lydia

I got caught by ICE, spent
three months locked up,

missed a son's birth.
My asylum case? Lost it.

I work in a nursing home.
I get gloves, a mask I wear

all day. No gown.

My wife and family . . . We are
scared.

About almost everything.

Source: All details from Tracy Jan, "Undocumented workers among those hit first—and worst—by the coronavirus shutdown," *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2020.

LOVE

Love and Adore (We Will All Come Out Together)

by Salma Arastu

Some say Planet Earth is under repair
Some say it is time for Sabbath
Sacred and blessed time to stay quiet and pray
Slow down and spend time with family
Every moment is transitory
Wise scriptures remind us again and again
You will be tested with some fear and hunger, loss of lives and wealth
But remain steadfast and feel deep gratitude
Trust these dark clouds will burst open and bring April showers
I have heard the birds chirping, spring is around the corner
We will all come out together and console each other
And love each other as never before
We are connected and dependent on each other more than before
We shall heal each other with much compassion and adore

Other Associated Words

Compassion, Connect/Connection, Healing, Hope

Love

by Robert McDowell

Who knows where & what it is

I thought I knew I thought I knew
A dozen times what love is
& who was bringing it up hill
Like water in a bucket
One by one they collapse
Among the poppies saying
I am tired bearing love all this way

The father drags himself up
From the fallen & walks out of their lives
Forever rather than darken
One more day A woman
Insists that love & ambition
Can coexist in perfect harmony
Yet in the end ambition wins

Love is humming with memory
A key to a door & another key
To the door inside that one
A well is on the path A woman
In a window goes on writing
Another takes her fences neither
Approaching nor fleeing from someone waiting

Prayer is mixed up in all of this too
Of course & the need to be still

Other Associated Words

Faith, Family, Grief, Spirit/Spiritual

RENEWAL

After the Fire (A Tanka)

by Laurie Klein

Light seeps through ruins
to bathe every broken place
till gaps become praise
for the first grassy wands waved
like wishes like prayers.



RESILIENCE

Tuesday, pandemic

by Drew Myron

My 85-year old friend waits at the window
for a single bird to flutter past,
the only companion she now has.

My dad adjusts his oxygen tube
and tells me he'll never hug again.
This will change everything, he says.

A neighbor has sewn masks that she hangs
from a string with a sign that says take one
as if we're sharing tomatoes or gossip.

To keep my mind from chatter, I jog again.
With each lap I breathe hard and cry steady
in gratitude and magnitude, in sadness, in circles.

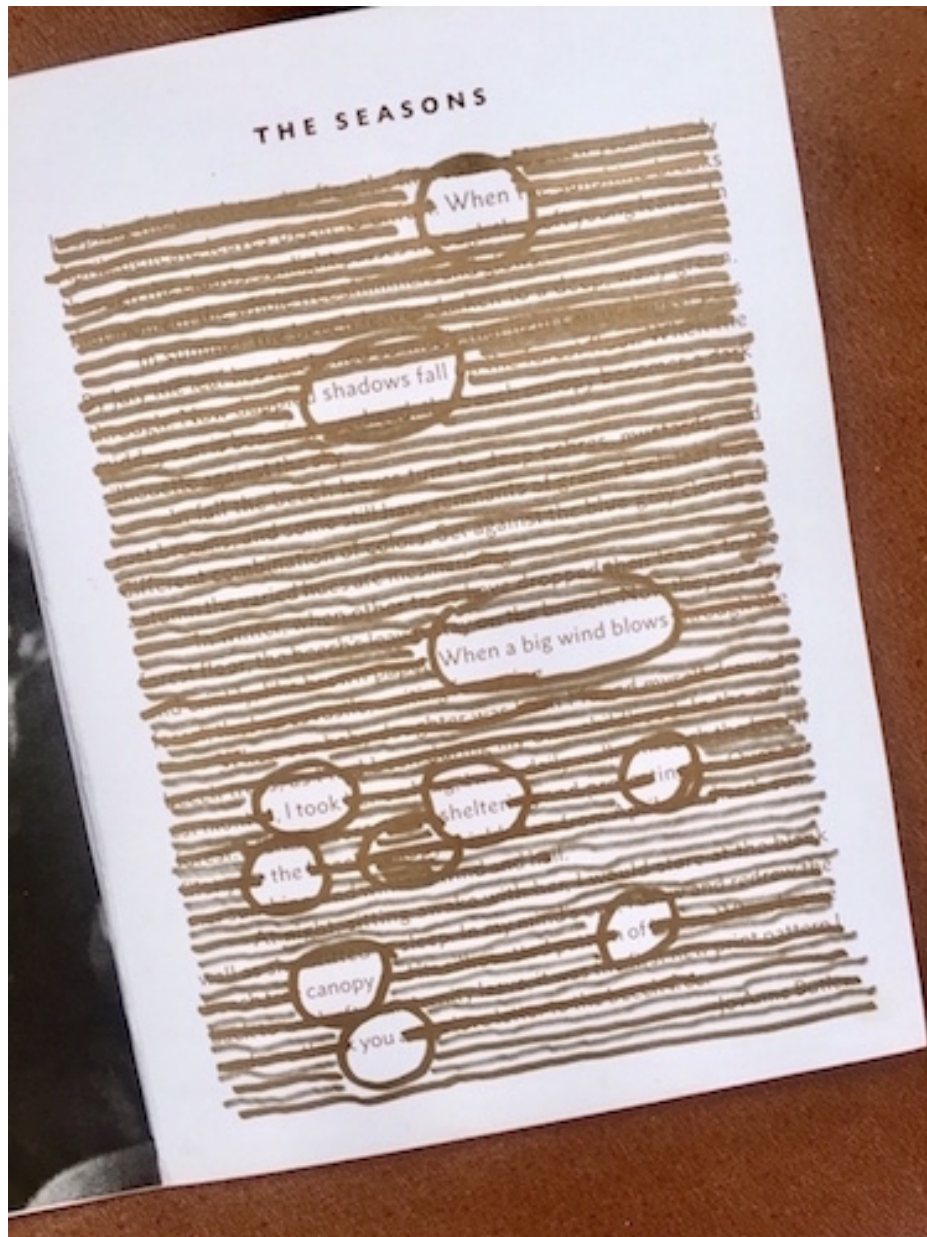
Other Associated Words

Community, Compassion, Grief, Isolation, Lockdown, Personal Protection Equipment

SHELTER

Canopy of you: An Erasure Poem

by Drew Myron



When shadows fall / When a big wind blows / I took / shelter in /
the / canopy of you

SOCIAL DISTANCING (PHYSICAL DISTANCING)

Social Distancing

by Kristin Berkey-Abbott

The grandmother feels a crush
of exhaustion and anxiety that leaves
her breathless: the weight
of years of caring for family members
or this new virus attacking
respiratory systems and society?

The pre-teen opens his French book
and then closes it. Why learn this language
in a time of travel bans? Silently,
he conjugates a different verb
each time he hears the word "virus,"
his heartbeat calming with each variation.

The medievalist thinks back to great
literature in a time of plague.
Who will be our Chaucer now?
She sends e-mail to her college students
now consigned to online classes
in a time of social distancing.
She puts the next load of laundry
in the washer, treating
the stains, hoping it will all come
out in the wash.

After Auden, after Brueghel

by Marjorie Maddox Hafer

“About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters . . .” W. H. Auden, *Musée des Beaux Arts*

There is no turning away from this,
or there is, the sandy-toed raising a glass
to the Atlantic’s deep blue forever
just as Icarus plunges (or Brueghel’s Icarus,
or Auden’s memory of Brueghel’s Icarus),
a memory of a memory of someone else’s suffering:
just incidental peripheral on a bright day of hangovers
until the undertow tugs down the neighbor
they may know slightly from,
in some other season,
skating at the edge of the wood,
or petting their doggy dog,
or even lining up beside them
for the miraculous birth,
which, too, may be cancelled
along with any resurrections
if the day is predictably sunny,
the landscape ready to plow or paint,
and the stubborn wind,
just in from a tsunami,
distracted enough for a sail.

Other Associated Words

Sheltering, Compassion, Fear, Remembrance

Note: This poem first appeared at Poems of the Pandemic, Headline Poetry & Press.

In a Time of ‘Social Distancing,’ I Miss My Mother

by Judith Sornberger

Of course, she missed Dad when he died
and wished her daughters lived closer,
but if she were alive now, she'd be fine
with these distances—she who prized
her own company as well as anyone else's.
Her idea of a good time was lounging
on the patio, her face tilted like a hungry
sunflower to sip the sun's gaze, her head
tipped back as she exhaled a whisper
of smoke from her Virginia Slims toward
clouds marching by in a lazy parade
more worth watching than anything.
Except maybe the chattering chorus
of copper and gray sparrows she summoned
with buttered toast crumbs on a tin pie plate.
She knew how to call whatever she most needed
to herself—patting her lap so her Boston terrier
sprang up and kissed the red lipstick from her mouth,
the dog's buggy eyes so big with love,
Mom had to laugh—that laugh everyone loved,
the one she gave me. The laugh that is always
bringing her back, calling me home to myself.

Other Associated Words

Family, Inspiration, Isolation, Lockdown, Loss, Love, Remembrance, Spirit/Spiritual

SOLACE

Always

by Christine Valters Paintner

It is always dawn somewhere
on this forever turning earth
eyes just now opening.

It is always midday someplace,
sun at its peak,
all of life illuminated.

It is always dusk somewhere,
sweet leaving of day
asking us to embrace the end.

It is always midnight someplace,
ten thousand dreams
erupting into the darkness.

Note: This poem is from Christine Valters Paintner's forthcoming collection *The Wisdom of Wild Grace* (Paraclete Press, October 2020). It is published here for the first time.

SPIRIT/SPIRITUAL

Spiritual

by Yahia Lababidi

So, what does it feel like
to be grounded, globally

sent to our rooms
like errant children

privileges suspended
and told to think hard

about why we got here
and how to get out?

Tell me, what's your plan?

II

We can't simply return to how we were after a crisis—
our homes have become cocoons for radical transformation

Others' lives, we finally realize, depend on us and vice versa,
either we change our ways, now, or perish alone-together. . .

And, if we survive, we might ask of this benevolent master:
Tell us, what new fast can we add to our days ahead?

The same way that Lent or Ramadan are spiritual reminders,
we should consider what sacrifice this pandemic asks of us.

What extreme limit have we reached, or trespassed?
As Laozi says: "Turning back is how the Way moves."

Don't bemoan your four walls, give thanks, for your necessary isolation
and pray to emerge from this chrysalis into a new consciousness.

III

So, what does it mean to be reborn?
It's having to relearn the basics:
how to walk, talk and eat . . . our words

Did you ever imagine the day when
we would have to be taught, as adults,
how to wash our hands . . . of our sins?

Time to sit, in humility, listen
and assume that we, really, know nothing.

Marcescence

by Michelle Ortega

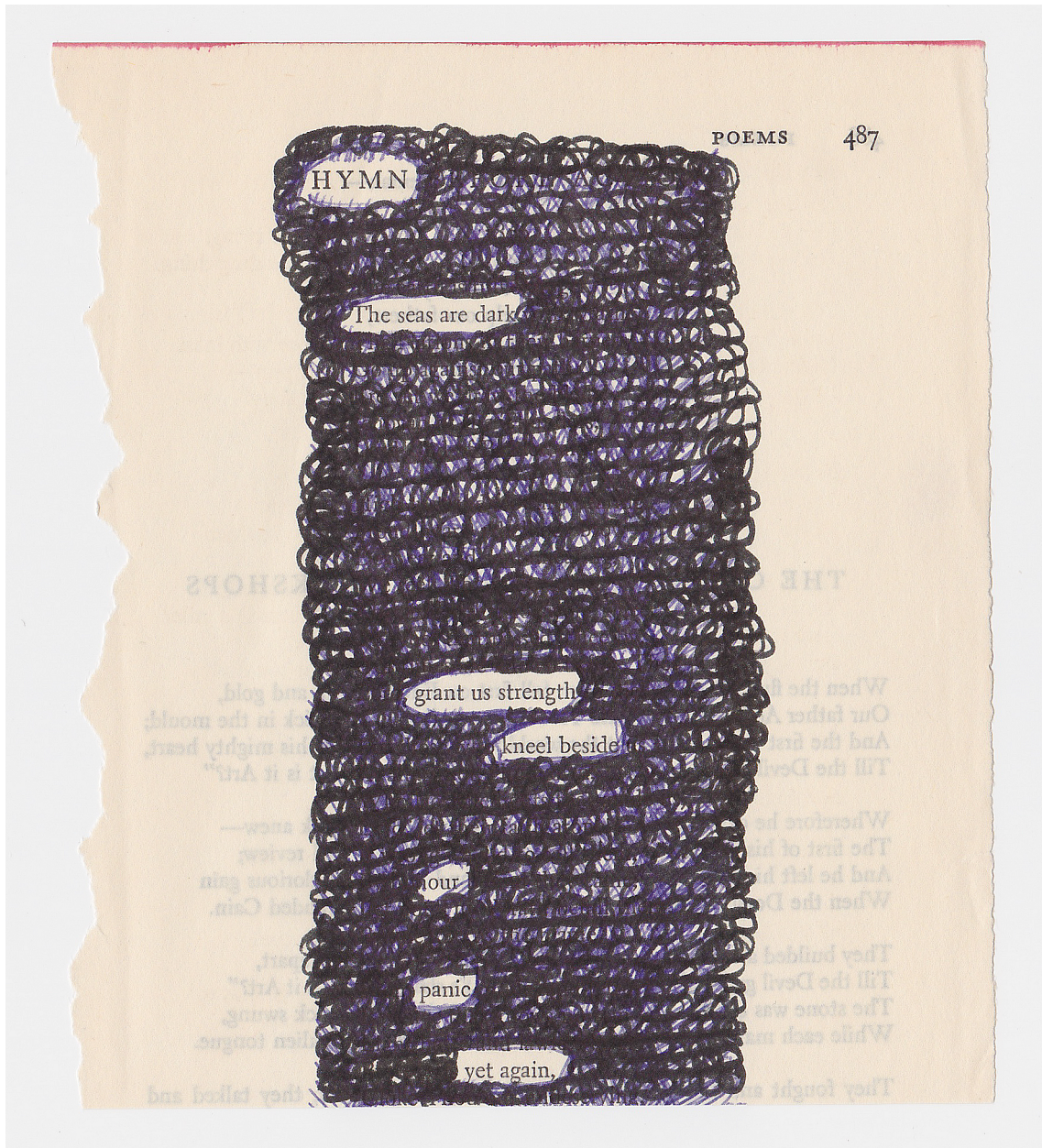
No rain falls with the storm, but energy whips through branches, pares away the brittle, scrubs bark to awaken buds. Fallen meets bloom with pentecostal chaos. The view from my bed, this new mid-day softness (healthy in the pandemic)—my own breath, a dryad whisper. Earth never stopped this song; only now am I still enough to hear it.

No words to pray, but each breath drawn beyond my lungs offered for those who step into the next life, unheld, unseen. For those that cling like dry leaves on a tree through winter. For those bent in the storm who do not break, but care for the ones who fall.

STRENGTH

Hymn: An Erasure Poem

by Drew Myron



The seas are dark / grant us strength / kneel beside / our / panic / yet again.

TECHNOLOGY

Crown

by Shanna Powlus Wheeler

In February 2020, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) released electron microscope images of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. The public can view the colorful gallery on the [NIAID Flickr page](#).

Infinitesimal germ, we are not immune
to your majesty.

Our scientists bow for hours before the statuesque
microscopes of our design

to watch you surface from our captive cells, bloom
in brilliant yellow clusters

like the pollen of this spring that insists on life despite
our hundred thousand dead.

True to your Latin name, your little suns rise, crown
the hills of our velvety cells.

As in frames of stained glass, you lurk in turquoise,
burnt orange, and coral.

Your diadems with their signature spikes of protein
strike a fear like worship.

Formidable pathogen, whose virulent form we magnify—
whose sting we feel—

even you resemble the thorns that pierced the One
who took our fear.

Other Associated Words

Fear, Spirit/Spiritual

TOUCH

Next to next

by Drew Myron

Months from now, will we savor a meal
at our favorite place, our faces close,
hands clasped tight? Will we share dessert,
our forks next-to-next, and not think twice
about what has touched, with whom, and how?
And at the house, will our friends gather?
Will we shake hands, pat backs, and hug hello?
Will I embrace my father without fear, and
offer more than a distant wave to the kind
neighbor passing? Tell me, will we kiss again,
reckless and sure?

Other Associated Words

Connect/Connection, Family, Fear, Hands, Healing

Notes

Cover Image: Jeanie Tomanek, "Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief", Acrylic on Panel, 16" x 12". Courtesy of Jeanie Tomanek and The Loft Marietta. © Jeanie Tomanek. All Rights Reserved. Please contact The Loft if you are interested in purchasing Tomanek's original painting: <http://www.loftmarietta.com>

The capitalized word or words that appear above poems' titles are those that the poets selected for their inspired responses to the novel coronavirus/COVID-19 and the theme of pandemic generally. Any associated words they selected appear after the poems. Poems under the headings are organized alphabetically by poets' last names.

Martha Silano's poem, "Van Gogh's 'Spring Garden'," responds to the artist's painting, and was written specifically for this project.

