

In Absentia

Reflections on the Pandemic

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April Ranger

Editors

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Cover and interior design by Katherine Kinsey. Set in Davis Sans.

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Made in the USA. Designed in San Francisco. PDF E-book Sale Edition November 2020.

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Publisher's Note

Nearly everyone associated with this project has been paid. Poets, editors, designers, the proofreader—nobody worked for free. Art does not diminish in value during a catastrophe.

The team practiced radical financial transparency during this project. A complete, updated breakdown of costs and payments is available for all to see on the Bicycle Comics website:

<https://www.bicycle-comics.com/pages/pandemic.html>

Book sales make future projects possible. Please be mindful of how you share this book.

In Absentia has been proofread to Bicycle Comics' usual standards. Some of the remaining deviations represent the stylistic choices of the poets and editors.

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Editors' Preface

This spring, when we signed on to gather poems for *In Absentia*, we all had questions about how it would take shape. This time has been hard in ways that reach far beyond poetry, when we're constricted by a virus we still know so little about. We knew our own personal feelings of isolation, disorientation, and fear. We also knew the challenges of maintaining the joys that come from our writing communities, as the world felt newly empowered to keep us from each other. Were people writing at all? What room was there for art among all the other ways we struggle to survive?

Late May, during the final stages of putting this project together, we were all witness to the murder of George Floyd, whose death echoes the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and the lineage of racial, systemic violence at the hands of police officers and white American citizens alike. What demons do we continue to validate through our words or through our silences? Plato wanted poets banished from influential roles of power. He wrongly believed poetry was unable to provide a reliable record of history. His view was far from objective. Our lens comes from Audre Lorde, who in her essay, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," wrote,

“...as we become more in touch with our own ancient, non-european consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we

learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and therefore lasting action comes.”

We can't avoid acknowledging how even distance is weaponized against us. The project at hand is about the issues we've had to deal with collectively in the form of a virus, but it is simultaneously about race, gender, sexuality, class, and the way those factors intersect.

Reading the poems sent to us for consideration for *In Absentia* made us feel less alone twice over. This chorus of voices presenting what they saw, the specifics of what they were living through, cut through our loneliness. The second gift, the one we should have expected but couldn't see in advance, was a comfort, an excuse to talk about poems together during these times. Attention to “made” things—how they function, what they contain, what we can learn from them—has been a sustaining joy for the three of us. Sharing that attention with each other and the poets herein has been another sustaining joy. Even away from the readings and workshops and bookstores and writing friends we love, we gain so much from the artistic practice we share as lovers of words. Distance is not merely an enemy; this time in isolation provides us with new language for asking what our neighbors need to keep going.

Every set of circumstances presents an opportunity to learn about ourselves and our world. In this set of circumstances, we learned that declaring a shared goal and working towards it pulled us out of our fears a few hours at a time, long enough to imagine ourselves less lonely.

We hope these poems will do that work for you as well, offering a window into the ways we can still hold one another, even across distance. We can't know what other changes are coming between the time spent writing this letter and when the anthology goes to press, but it's been an honor to gather these voices together as a record of life during the early days of the pandemic. All the poems included here were written before May 1, 2020. Thank you for making space in yourself to receive these miniature histories. We hope that, as they did for us, they'll help you feel less alone.

Nkosi Nkululeko

Emily O'Neill

April Ranger

June 6, 2020

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No Opera.

After Derek Walcott

sam sax

no walk to the bar after dark. no one gathered
on corners shattering laughter & bottles. no one
standing in line for the singer who traveled by bus
to die on this stage only to rise again in the next city
& the next. no one seated in amphitheaters staring
up at screens or at actors pretending to be ghosts
in the trees. no touching. no democracy. no reason
to put on clothing. no just protests outside the capitol
building. no breathing without a kerchief knotted
around the neck. no job listings posted. no dollar
bill tucked into the dancer's glossy jockstrap;
no clapping after the performance. no funerals
or stage lights or gobos. no arias sung in america.
no bars to escape to. still people standing in line
for bread & elections. still the birds' wild partition
in the trees. still the elevated train passes my window
on the hour, dark as a book in a shuttered library.
still the light falling on the empty street corner
this morning, so devastating i had to sit down
on the pavement just to praise it.

The dinner bell

Joanna Hoffman

My favorite time of day now is 7 p.m.
when the applause and hoots and cow bells
ring from the outside world and I lean against
the window frame, adding my own solo hoot
to the chorus, and my cat adds her meow,
maybe thinking that, like her, we are all
calling to be fed. and maybe we are,
leaning in to the sound of other humans
as if it were a crackling fire. today, i have
been in isolation for a month. i haven't
touched a human being or spoken to
one in person who wasn't a grocery clerk
or the urgent care doctor, that time I may
have had the virus and a worried-looking
man checked my lungs. *you're okay, you
just need an inhaler*, he told me from behind
the mask. and I started to cry a little, in gratitude
for my lungs and also for him. *thank you so much*,
I rasped, from behind my own mint-green veil.
thank you so much, we roar into the setting sky

every evening at dusk. to the health workers, the grocery clerks, the pharmacy staff, the warehouse workers. to each other, our ears angled out to the world we cannot touch.

The President Says to Shoot Up Bleach

C. Bain

and it flutters, aghast, up from the ground
of my being like a kicked pigeon, says *to clean
the inside, very interesting, looking into it.* and I'm
thinking, have you
seen inside? the filth engine we barely contain.
anything dies when it's finally clean, I've counted
days, *clean time*, gripping the folding chair under me
in the church basement, I was supposed to die in my
filth
before all of this.

the president says to put a disinfecting light
inside the body, a disinfecting body, the president who
I don't like to talk about says drink bleach
and poison control centers all start to get the call,
sarcasm,
sarcasm, I took quinine once, which is
a lot like hydroxychloroquine and fucking sucks,
I was in sub-Saharan Africa and had gotten malaria
like a genius. like a tourist. so they took

my dying body and hooked it up to a drip
of antique cures, the bubbles in the IV line
pearling and terrifying me, my teeth ached,
mosquitos sang into my ear all night. putting light
inside your body is actually pretty good advice.

my president dies and dies, last year, V_____
who the cancer took quick, and D____, who fought
and fought the tumors blooming in her sex-part where
her father had found her 50 years before. maybe it
doesn't matter

if we try to love ourselves, maybe it's too late anyway.
I'm not sure how C_____ killed himself,
or if it was an overdose, an accident, or what, I only
know

that he was in Chang Mai, which he loved, because
he's like me, a tourist, American, soulless, trying
to get some light inside his body. I hope
he was high as fuck and that the leaves were deep
deep green at the corners of his vision, and beautiful.
I'm just a boy he fucked for a while which means
the estate won't eventell me how he died. the president

says drink bleach and in my recovery rooms
a man says I remember when they'd slide your food
through a slit in the hospital door because they thought
they could catch Gay Cancer from the fucking air
bleach bleach bleach disinfectant the lungs the light
of the body, blots of it floating leprous
to the surface of the skin spilled and growing.

when I had malaria I weighed 112 pounds,
veins on the front of my forehead like worms insistent
I know what I'll look like when I'm clean, when I'm dead,
I know what I'll look like disinfected, light inside
the body, a faggot, a faggot burning.

the tents go up in the parking lot across
the street, I know they're medical
but the men going in and out are all in
desert camouflage, cosplaying for a war
with something you can see. In my recovery
groups J___ says he went to the health food store.
“oh, I remember this, we're all out of zinc
and elderberry and black seed oil
and bitter melon and all this other
shit because someone read a bad news article
that said it would save us,” put the light
inside and it becomes a key, an angel, a silence.

respecting the war means respecting
the troops, a phalanx of dead
pile up in the refrigerated trucks
demanding rations, demanding memory, more
light. the president puts them in combat fatigues
shoves them into the street, stagecraft.

the mobile police station that set up
outside my apartment last year, flooding
every window with light all night for weeks
because there had been a single murder, meanwhile

insurgencies, Turkey, Libya, we come home
and home is burning, an infection has followed
those that returned. a body deployed
against itself. autoimmune. a sea shanty
drinking song. the lifeboat floorboards
of my apartment pitch and sway
until they've knocked me down,
until alcohol, a disinfectant, touches me
like a father inside, until I'm clean,
a pile of roses, a flag, my grave, a swollen
mound of dirt with no one to tamp it down.

How to Become Un-buried Alive

Siaara Freeman

You expect this poem to have more dirt & less
fingernails

unblinking eyes, dry—like a hurried cough. *Where are
the worms,*

you wonder, can only things cut in half survive here?

You don't look down, you hate the idea of nothing. It's
more air here than you

figured. A kiss of conscience keeps a steady claw, it's
light & wet on the edges

& makes you dream of clouds & makes you wonder
which cloud dreams of you?

You float toward those clouds bursting with your name.
Are you aware

there's a species of orchid that flowers underground?

Rhizanthella, no nectar,

scales where the demand is leaves, one unsplittable
berry. The flowers grow inward.

When anyone asks what is your favorite flowers you say
Rhizanthella instead of sunflowers

or honeysuckle, because truth often feels less important
than survival. Also,

when you receive flowers it always smells of tombstone,
like it had to dig its own decaying

self out first.

Aubade for Waking in the Pandemic

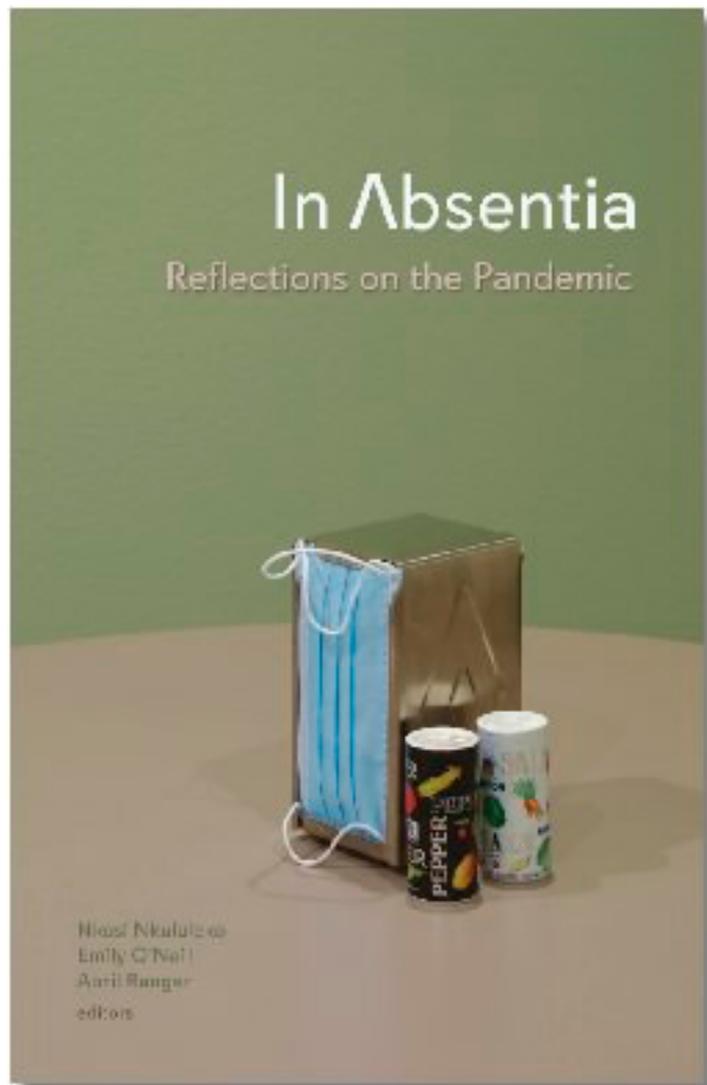
M. Soledad Caballero

I wake to dreams of bread
warm, soft, like the middle of
my mouth. Between the moments
of light and sleeping, I smell
my Abuela's sopaipillas after
school, sweet with honey. Not
bread but something tender,
the midnight kiss of the night
before. Mornings now I do
not wonder about the past
very much. I keep still. I try
to keep still, stop the aching
of the unknown, the pooling
of my thoughts about this
world that is no longer wonder
but beast, Grendel stalking
at dawn before Beowulf
tore off his arm and hand, stuck
them to the beams of the king's
hall. Even without Grendel,

these mornings are slivers
of memory stalking, warning
about the fire that is yet to come,
or perhaps the forest already
burned and we are the ash left
over after. Still, I wake up,
imagine bread, the salt,
the warmth of butter.

In Absentia

Reflections on the Pandemic



In Absentia: Reflections on the Pandemic

Our newest poetry anthology documents the fear, the injustice, the defiance, and even the humor of the novel coronavirus disaster. *In Absentia: Reflections on the Pandemic* offers 28 new poems from Sara Brickman, Laura Brown-Lavoie, Drew Pham, sam sax, Kimberly Ann Southwick, and over a dozen other talents. [Available in paperback, on Kindle, and as a phone-optimized PDF Ebook.](#)

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“*In Absentia* speaks to the urgency of our present crises, but does so by offering up intimacy, eros, fleeting joy, the image of good bread, poetry itself...all those things that allow life to go beautifully and terribly on.”

–Cameron Awkward-Rich
Assistant Professor of Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies
University of Massachusetts Amherst

“COVID has taught America about exhaustion, a deep feeling echoing in our bones, at times too difficult to put into words. And yet, this collection of writers manages to dig fingers into the darkness suffocating each of us and unearth honest, relatable moments for us cling to. *In Absentia* holds up the mirror and pokes at the wound, a gentle reminder that yes, we are still here, we are still alive.”

–Carrie Rudzinski
Author of *Break the Ceiling* and *Barefoot Whale Riders*

Written during the early weeks of the Novel Coronavirus’s outbreak in North America, the poems of *In Absentia* document cultures on the cusp of devastation. These poems capture the fear, the grief, the defiance, and the hope of that first wave.

Poems selected and edited by Nkosi Nkululeko, Emily O’Neill, and April Ranger.

