



THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE

ART IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

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to the survivors of Covid-19,
who must now live and thrive

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Introduction

AN ART IN SILENCE

If you do not press the cow's udder, it will not produce milk. And so are we, humans. We hardly ever discover the vast abilities and prodigious gifts within us until we are confronted by harsh, stifling conditions. In the flower of our lives, we tend to hold firmly onto the profanity of racism, the toxicity of ethnicity and the avarice of selfishness, but as we wither like grass, we begin to seek the grace of love and the tranquility of truth. It is a ponderable and sad reality that we are open to mental and emotional enlightenment only in the face of death, in that moment of bodily weakness when everything else does not, and will not, matter.

Coronavirus has come to press us hard, so that we can bring out the milk of kindness buried inside us. It is showing us the need to embrace love when it is still possible to benefit from the freedom it offers. It is telling us to respect one another. It is reaffirming our common humanity. We should all pay attention.

Through the Eye of a Needle is born out of a gentle but fearless attention to the sudden changes overtaking the world before our eyes. It subsumes the testimonies of various artists caught, but not trapped, in the fearsome web of the pandemic. Although these artists, like the rest of us, partake in the anxiety of our age, they do not lament so inconsolably about their private loss. They rather transcend their own misfortune in their humane attempt to comfort the grieving world, ultimately establishing kinship with the dead and the dying, proving,

especially in this time of physical lockdown, that the warmth art offers can dispel loneliness and chase away fear.

In the time of coronavirus, the artist is called upon, not to speak for people and places, but to them. The contributors to this collection express this consciousness in their imaginative and daring responses to the pandemic. Their language is composed, in the manner of one consoling another, and the beauty of the tapestry they weave is measured, not by perfect sentences, but by living, breathing words, capable of healing the world.

It is profoundly redeeming to have these artists of varied disciplines devote their energies and geniuses to curate with me the anxieties of our time engendered, as well as intensified, by a virus more menacing than a death sentence, an ominous force that has sworn to push the world into the void of irredeemable cataclysm. Their responses, varying in temperament and scope, jointly testify, with compassion and clarity, to the endurance of the human spirit in moments of crisis. The emotions embodied in their essays—the concatenation of the personal and the public, the juxtaposition of hope and despair, the confession of weakness and strength, the resignation to and confrontation of fate, the rising and falling of faith, the gathering and dispersing of details, the acceptance and denial of truth, the binary of joy and anguish—all consolidate the severity of the tragedy wrought by this pandemic and as well capture the artists' apprehensions of the changing world.

The first responsibility of the artist is to be human. To be human is to have both a consciousness of the self and a conscious sensitivity towards others. I can't afford the luxury of total happiness, because my street is full of emaciated people who may die of starvation before the virus strikes; because at my backyard is a colony

of misinformed young people drowning in bottles of gin, with the hope of protecting themselves against the virus; because my country, whose government is yet to take full responsibility for the welfare of its citizens, has become a market of people buying and selling hope. And in spite of the darkness overwhelming the world, I make out time to listen to my cousin's fantasies. Her talks about her fiancé and their future marriage fill me with optimism in these dark times. Also, in spite of the necessity to put this collection together and send it out to the world, with the hope that it will speak to somebody in urgent need of company, I find time to write to a dear friend who has been battling with depression since the death of his childhood sweetheart. Because I am a human being, when I see pictures of deserted streets on the television and read about the increasing number of deaths caused by the virus, I shed tears and then say a silent prayer for the beleaguered world.

The second responsibility of the artist is to pay attention to the changes in their society. When we speak of the artist's vision, we do not only mean their ability to see tomorrow. We are also, and more importantly, referring to their social awareness and to the empathy with which they document the human experience.

You may ask: what does the artist know that the rest of the society does not know? Is it lack, failure or disease? The society has twice experienced more crisis than the artist, so it carries more scars than all the artists of all times. But why do we still speak of the artist as the vanguard of the human cause? It is because the artist captures the colours and shapes of our collective destiny, documenting the history of that lack, failure and disease, offering us redemptive opportunities.

These artists whose writings are congregated here rise above the pressures of time and the limitations of space to articulate our shared reality. They shut their eyes, connected with their spirits and wrote, from a place of physical lockdown,

about emotional and mental liberty. They have refused to forget what should be remembered. And we will remember them for that.

The third responsibility of the artist is to remember. The artist understands the essence of history in building a brighter and better future for humanity, so they commit themselves towards the preservation of the past. Music, literature, painting, or sculpting becomes the artist's medium of preserving history. The essays compiled here bring to light the boldness of the nations of the world in standing up against a common enemy.

These artists see a future beyond the time of coronavirus. And it is that future that they have documented here. Alain Jules Hirwa's "The Art of Small Spaces" explores the interiority of life and elevates the sacredness of private spaces above the noise of social cluster; Echezonachukwu Nduka's "Art as a Lifeline," an orchestra of the sublime and the poetic, offers us all the wonder and entertainment of a music class; Nnamdi Oguike's "The Great Leveller" is an absorbing revelation of the humanity of the artist, a renunciation of the cupidity of the Nigerian political class, and a sympathetic message to the endangered world; Jennifer Chinenye Emelife's "What's To Become Of Us When It's All Over?" offers us a confident vision of that future after coronavirus; Sarah Ládípo Manyika's "On Being an Artist in the Time of Covid-19" consolidates the role of the artist in these complicated times; Neil Creighton's "The Metaphor of War" revisits the intolerable colonial experience of his native Australia in the wake of the tragedy of the pandemic; Hina Ahmed's "Changing Spaces" reaffirms the transformative power of art; Ukamaka Ollisakwe's "Art as an Escape" is a moving account of a mother's longing for her children, and how that desire is usually placated by the treasures of books; Chimezie Chika's "A View of Hope" fills the heart with regret for the things that used to be, yet it sees a future where what is lost is regained and valued; Oka

Osahon's "The World Does Not End Here" sings with hope for the return of breath in the dead places of our private and social lives; Jason Mykl Snyman's "What Kind of Animal" is a portrait of the subliminality of the mind of the artist; and Ikhide R. Ikheloa's "Art in the Age of Anxieties" is a daring statement on the politics of survival, and an absorbing exploration of the history of art and the art of history.

I thank the contributors, for believing in and committing to this project. I am additionally, and endlessly, grateful to Nnamdi Oguike, for labouring with me, day and night, on this project. In spite of his own writing engagement, he found time to read all the essays. His editorial suggestions opened doors to vast possibilities. Sefi Atta assured me of her prayers; Unoma Azuah sent me colourful flowers; Chika Unigwe and E.C. Osundu were generous with encouragements; Richard Ali's impassioned response motivated me; Brigittie Poirson, as always, is a blessing too large and too big to describe; Laura M. Kaminski's love is a light; and Prof. Isidore Diala's support makes everything complete. I am deeply grateful.

Because writing is an art in silence, which gives voice to the silenced and expresses solidarity with the suffering, it is my hope that these private meditations will keep you company in these uncertain times.

Darlington Chibueze Anuonye,

Owerri, April 2020

The Art of Small Spaces

Alain Jules Hirwa

Covid-19 has called us to reconsider those small spaces that we sometimes overlook. We occupy the world, yet our homes are empty. These past weeks should make us understand that there are other spaces in the world that need to be filled, and we have to fill them. Inside this house that I'm locked in, there is life, and I feel it. Last night, people of different faiths observed their religious rituals in their homes. The revelation is that the body is the true spiritual temple.

I am thinking of the things this pandemic is teaching me: that a dot can be an ocean, that a full stop can be a door out of a house or a pavement into more backrooms. It is teaching me how to listen to silence. I'm learning that silence is not silent. I'm trying to close my eyes for a while, so that I can see well, like the little boy who walked into the rain, cupped his small hand and trapped a raindrop, ran to his mother in the kitchen and said, "Mum, I hold the sea in my palm. See."

Like that child, I no longer want to read a whole manuscript. I want to read one letter from its pages and spend on it the same time I used to devote to an entire book. The time has come for us to build castles out of one stone, like naked kids constructing sandcastles at the beach.

A week ago, I was alone in the street. I walked in the middle of the street, all the way from my house to downtown, not because I enjoyed breaking the rules of the curfew, but because I wanted to know how it feels to be the center of the world, the vehicles and buildings staring at me. But it felt like nothing. The buildings have no

eyes. None of them said to me: "Boy, you look beautiful!" They don't judge. Maybe they think everything is the same. Small is big. A raindrop is a sea. They do not discriminate.

But we, humans, segregate. Remember that when Covid-19 rose from China, Donald Trump called it the virus of the Chinese. Now he knows better. Remember, also, that racism is an invented system of ignorance. Whatever threatens my brother is a threat to me. Today, it is my brother; tomorrow, it may be me.

A man on Rwanda Television was asked by a newscaster to offer his thoughts on what the post Covid-19 times will look like. He said a lot of things, but his words that "people will be able to kiss each other again" struck me, because I know how a curfew waters the lilacs of love. Lovers can exist in different forms. A lover can be a memory, a person, a habit, or a place. But, now, I'm thinking of how a curfew is a man learning not to take the world for granted. A curfew can teach a man to love the world, to love his fellow travellers, to love places, to love flowers. I know that lovebirds will kiss again when the pandemic is over.

Two weeks ago, I saw on RTV that the Italian fashion house, Armani, sent models down the runway in an empty theatre. Their show was closed to the public and livestreamed instead, as a measure to curtail the spread of the virus. When I saw the models walk on the catwalk of the empty theatre, I saw a man exhibiting his wound to himself. When I'm alone in my room, I revisit my nudity. A curfew is a man revisiting his private spaces, and that's a privilege. I think this curfew should remind us of the art of the hidden, the buried, the restricted and the abandoned.

Many of us have scars somewhere on our bodies. If the body is a map, then those scars are a ghost town. We only remember the ghost town when the other towns are overpopulated. I once told my friend that if I were a photographer, which I might become anytime, I'd document lives in private spaces.

Today, I hold the sea in my palm.

Art as a Lifeline

Echezonachukwu Nduka

For the past few weeks, the human race has been confounded and overwhelmed by Covid-19, together with its attendant influx of conspiracy theories. My initial reaction has been to observe, with a heightened sense of curiosity and wonder, the varied responses of people to the pandemic. It is at once ironic that to save loved ones, ourselves, and indeed everyone else, we have to physically distance ourselves from them. The delineation of community and communal bonding in the twenty-first century has again been put to test. Since the statistics of casualties, both those who tested positive to the virus and those who have died, keep soaring each day, I am reminded of our limitations and imperfections as humans. It is heartening, however, that in Italy and other parts of the world, videos have surfaced of neighbours singing in balconies to entertain and encourage themselves in the wake of the lockdown. On various social media platforms, artists are hosting free live broadcast shows online to engage with audiences across the globe.

A few weeks ago, Deutsche Grammophon, a German classical music record label headquartered in Berlin, hosted a live concert which featured selected world class classical musicians on their YouTube channel. Among the performers was one of my favorite pianists, Lang Lang. All through the live broadcast, I was one with thousands of viewers from many parts of the world, partaking in the gift of music.

There we were, in our bedrooms, living rooms, or wherever, united by art while the world was weeping to the sting of Covid-19. Lang Lang was the first act.

Shortly after his performance of a short piece by Felix Mendelssohn and one variation from J.S Bach's Goldberg Variations, a stage hand quickly disinfected the piano keys, in preparation for the next performer. That moment, it struck me that no matter how much we value our art and gifts, humanity must strive to protect itself by every means possible. That singular act of disinfecting the piano keys after each performance was a form of performance in itself, one that marked the severity of the season; and would go on until the show ended.

The Deutsche Grammophon concert brings to mind a conversation I had with Gaamangwe Joy Mogami in 2019, for Africa in Dialogue. I made reference to one of the most famous photographs on the internet titled "Russian soldier playing an abandoned piano." Till date, I still mull over what it means for a soldier in the midst of a battle to stop at the sight of an upright piano in the jungle, hang his rifle, and play a few notes. What does it mean to choose art, to choose music, as an alternative sound to that of bullets and grenades, right in the midst of chaos? I submitted to my interlocutor that music affirms our humanity and helps us to make sense of our collective grief and vulnerability. My thesis remains the same. Or perhaps, it has been corroborated or even made clearer by recent reactions of humanity to the pandemic. In the midst of grave danger and confusion, we are wont to cling onto art in all its sublime shades, for succour, clarity, alternative realities, and for the degree of healing that we cannot offer ourselves. On this premise, I agree with Ben Okri who argues that art becomes most powerful in the face of death. As an artist, I am reminded of the potency of what keys I hold, and how the doors of humanity depend on them. As people lose their loved ones to the pandemic, and as social media news-mongers focus more on death than recoveries, I arrive again at the point where I meet myself whenever I am faced with the question of mortality and transcendence. No answer suffices.

I am not under pressure to create or perform. However, I have benefitted from the performance of other artists who may have inspired me to share my art with others. In addition to the Deutsche Grammophon concert, I have participated in live shows on Instagram, watching comedy shows, the performance of various musical artists, and readings from poets such as Yrsa Daley-Ward, Chika Jones, and Upile Chisala, to name a few. Consequently, Bibi Ukonu and I, in order to engage our audience and share our art with the world as well, scheduled to host a poetry reading live on Instagram. While I must admit that the pace of my writing has stalled a bit in the past few weeks, I have found solace in the works of others. And for me, that suffices. I have been reading essays by some writers whose works resonate, and having conversations with fellow artists.

It is common to hold onto the notion that the artist's creative spirit dances in response to all shades of pain. In other words, the artist is expected to create, even in the lowest of human conditions, and share with the world. To view the response of artists through one lens would not only be erroneous, but it negates the axiom that humanity thrives on diversity. Artists must not respond to certain human conditions in a singular manner, or at once.

To be an artist in this season of lockdown is to cling towards introspection and self appraisal. Oftentimes, we give and give and forget to refill ourselves with all things necessary for growth. In other words, Covid-19 could mean well for the artist who must now stay indoors alone with his art. In this instance, if the urge to practice trumps the urge to perform, it is to the artist's advantage. Also, if the urge to take a desired break trumps the urge to make art, it is to the advantage of the artist.

In addition to soaking myself in the sonic world of symphonies and new sonatas, I have been studying Robert Schumann's set of thirteen beautiful miniatures titled *Kinderszenen* Op. 15, which loosely translates to "Scenes from Childhood." Two years ago, I had performed "Traumerei," arguably the most famous piece from the set, as one of my encore pieces after a recital in South Jersey. But the guilt of not having the whole set in my repertoire would not stop tormenting me. Numerous practice sessions where this guilt would have been extinguished were rather spent practising solo piano music by African composers. The current lockdown has, in many ways, provided the much needed break which has enabled me to redirect my focus. In the next few weeks, I would have added *Kinderszenen*, one of concertgoers' all time favorites, to my repertoire.

In this season of overwhelming despondency and loss when artists are standing shoulder to shoulder with the rest of humanity, it is gainful for the artist to not only look inwards for revival, but to also appreciate the exalted place of art in the affairs of humanity.

The Great Leveller

Nnamdi Oguike

In all my life I haven't seen any force of proven ability to level up people and classes and backgrounds as Covid-19 has. I, and many other people, have dubbed it "The Great Leveller." These are daunting times. The new virus has at different times made me feel almost helpless. I have felt the aura of importance that being a writer confers desert me. Writers and artists sometimes appear as small gods because we possess abilities similar to those of God. We create characters and fill books with them. We even create places. And in our plots we create time. Perhaps nothing can better fill one with a false sense of power than being an artist. But this time of Covid-19 has made me reconsider my powers.

A couple of days ago, I saw a post on Facebook by the Nigerian writer and journalist, Henry Akubuiro, inviting prayers on behalf of the American artist, Horace Lee, down with the virus and fearing for his life. I was almost in tears when I read that the artist doubted if he could see the next day. Now Lee is a man like me. He could think up colours and shapes and things, and create. But, in that moment, he struggled for his life. I lowered my head and offered my heartfelt prayers. I wished I had the fictional powers of my stories to give him a fantastical miracle. I felt utterly powerless.

I have been able to write at this time and, more importantly, to engage with friends and family on the pandemic. I have written a story based on the pandemic. It's a miracle that I can still write at this time. Perhaps it's not even a miracle. The social or physical distancing leaves a writer with a few choices in these circumstances. Write or be written off, it seems. It has helped to preserve my

sanity. The events of the last couple of months have more solidly demonstrated what I have tried to do with my collection of short stories, *Do Not Say It's Not Your Country*. Coronavirus has covered more countries than my book has and is sworn to cover the globe. It is the most widespread onslaught against humanity that I have seen in my lifetime. It attacks bodies, finances, the economies of countries, cultures and religions. It has changed every country now.

When the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, I guess a lot of people may have thought it was a Chinese problem. Even as Italy began to totter, and fall, some may have thought it was an Italian problem. But then our first case of the disease in Nigeria was recorded by an Italian in Nigeria. And that showed how interconnected our world is. But now, even with the closure of borders and suspension of flights, we still feel the interconnectedness of our lives. We have seen how we are the same basically. The rich, the poor, the young, the old, the religious, the irreligious, the white, the black, everyone is together in this maelstrom. Africans and non-Africans die from this disease. They also survive this disease.

The world, as we have known it since we were born, has often emphasized our differences. Of course we have differences. And they can be great. But, sadly, our differences have been exploited to pit us against one another. We have always thought of football matches as possessing the powers to unite people. But matches unite club supporters only. And, besides, their uniting powers wear off soon after the end of the matches. But humanity seems united against a virus now. This unity isn't wearing off soon. I hope that the virus won't be here for too long. And that after it is gone, we will not go back to our old ways of biting each other's liver, and that the world powers collaborating now to fight it will not quit the good work and pounce on their Kalashnikovs and nuclear warheads.

One of the things we may be thankful for at this time is that a lot of us may have the luxury of thought. We can sit down and think of our lives. Our politicians, who are now in Nigeria with the poor, can sit down and think about how they have failed humanity. They can look at the country they have made for themselves and their children and children's children. They should get a report card for themselves. I'm sure this is not a time for them to boast. There are no figures to boast about. They know that if they come down with the virus, they may not be able to scramble out a hospital bed or a ventilator. Also, I hope the thugs who have enabled the politicians will also be able to think and see that they haven't done well either. They are in the poorest of places, in squalor, with soldiers whipping them back inside to observe the lockdown. I hope they curate these nightmares so that when another election time comes and the political hippos come out of the water and ask them to go and snatch ballot boxes or burn electoral offices, they will remember Covid-19.

I think about all these things now. I think we should sit at home and think.

What's To Become Of Us When It's All Over?

Jennifer Chinenye Emelife

I was taking a short walk the other day and it hit me how different things have become: the emptiness of a street once effervescent, the mirthless echo of birds chirping and flapping their wings across trees with thin branches and few leaves, incessant cries of hungry seagulls who have no food to snatch from passersby and buildings standing all tall by themselves accompanied only by my shadow.

There is a certain hollowness that comes with being alone in the way that we are now. Devoid of physical touch, the body begins to shut down on itself and so in a bid to keep it active, we try to fill it up with activities, and never has social media been more valuable than in these times. From the temporary distraction Tiktok provides, to the magic hands of Triller where anyone can become an artiste or the faux feeling of togetherness Houseparty creates and the numerous hashtag challenges happening online; everyone appears to be searching for something to latch onto, something to validate our existence in a time that suggests otherwise. Imagine then for a second what this season would mean for millions in the world if there was no social media?

Our lives are changed by this pandemic. We are slowly learning to do without many things we swore our lives depended on. We are learning to find new ways to live. We are learning to stay away from many places we thought we'd never be able to avoid. We are dropping old habits but we are also picking up new ones. Or falling back into habits we left years ago because we got preoccupied. We are doing everything we can to survive these unprecedented times and by merely

doing so, we are becoming different and adjusting to this new normal. In the midst of all the changes, one thing is certain: our lives will never remain the same. And so my question is, if and when things return to the way they were, will we recognise ourselves? Will our new selves fit into the old world that has shut us out? How will we reconcile who we have become with who we were to fit back into a world that deserted us?

There are lessons to be learnt here. Just a girl in her room, thousands of miles away from home, two essay deadlines, one dissertation and a Master's degree hanging over her head like an albatross, contemplating on the changes happening around her and wondering how these changes have now come to re-define humanity. But for sure: stay safe.

On Being an Artist in the Time of Covid-19

Sarah Ládípò Manyika

I have always been drawn to the way that James Baldwin described his role as a writer: being a witness. I see this as my role too—to bear witness as best as I can, to listen deeply and carefully, and to write when I am able to. Moreover, because much of writing is about putting oneself in other people's shoes, it is at times like this—times of great uncertainty and hardship—that provide us with greater opportunities to experience beyond the normal and to learn from this.

In this period of Covid-19, with all the additional, practical demands, I have less time to devote to writing. When I do, it's often in small bursts, but inspired by my friend and writer, Akin Adeşokan, I have started journaling (in audio and text), and I find this therapeutic. It gives me a sense of accomplishment and provides some structure and routine to days which otherwise seem to pass in a blur. With journaling, I'm creating a record that I hope to return to at a later point.

One thing that I know to be true about writing, but so often forget, is that some of my best ideas come at the most unexpected moments, and that these moments of serendipity often occur when I step outside my comfort zone and allow myself to be more open to new thoughts, new experiences and new challenges.

These days I spend much of my time on the extra cleaning, cooking, and planning that is needed to support my family, as well as checking in virtually on friends and neighbours. In the process, I am learning a lot about myself and others—all of which is ultimately valuable for writing. At the same time, I am

encouraged by the many who are writing about the state of things today, as well as by the simple, yet profoundly powerful, recordings of people's lives. I'm also returning to great writers of the past whose words provide solace and insight. Here, for example, from James Baldwin:

"Art has to be a kind of confession. I don't mean a true confession in the sense of that dreary magazine. The effort, it seems to me, is: if you can examine and face your life, you can discover the terms with which you are connected to other lives, and they can discover them, too, the terms with which they are connected to other people.

"This has happened to every one of us, I'm sure. You read something which you thought only happened to you, and you discovered it happened 100 years ago to Dostoyevsky. This is a very great liberation for the suffering, struggling person, who always thinks that they are alone. This is why art is important. Art would not be important if life were not important, and life is important."

—James Baldwin from his 1961 interview with Studs Terkel

The Metaphor of War

Neil Creighton

I read an essay by an Italian novelist. "In we Italians," she says, "you can see your future, just as we saw ours in Wuhan." I watch the Baby-Man in denial, selling his deceit and aggrandizement: "Perfect response... Ten out of ten.... Tremendous job.... Previous administration.... Blah blah blah." I see images from New York: deserted streets; hospitals filled; people wheeled from ambulances. Social media is filled with posts from the religious right, the self-proclaimed "saved." The death toll rises. In Australia, we are in isolation. No group is to be larger than two. The beaches are closed. Schools shut. Even the pubs have closed. Some friends, more vulnerable than others, post of their fear. The black dog is visiting them. Supermarket shelves are often empty of flour, tinned food and sanitary products. There is a crazy run on toilet paper.

And everywhere I hear the metaphor of war.

The death toll in Australia is low in comparison to other places, but one of our poets wrote how, in loss, "the spider grief swings in his bitter geometry." Each one of those deaths is the heavy burden of grief.

I walk in my garden in my little country property, far from urban areas. It is peaceful here. The winding paths beckon. Rosellas drink at the stone bird baths. Skinks scurry into the protection of dry-stone walls. In this peace, I am thinking of war, conquest and the fall of empire. I recall how blind Homer understood that conquest by stealth is effective when strong walls stand. The Trojans unwittingly

dragged the enemy, hidden in the wooden horse, into the heart of their city. Babylon, too, thought itself secure in its high walls and great wealth. As the foolish king caroused behind the seeming safety of his walls, Cyrus diverted the mighty Euphrates and his army entered the city along the dried-up riverbed. Conquest often comes by stealth and surprises complacent people. Now, a mighty enemy, Covid-19, has entered our city. It has taken us by surprise. Who can tell the extent of its rampaging?

I think of something close to home as I walk through my garden. Not all conquest is by stealth. Sometimes we face an enemy more powerful than us. Then the only recourses are to stand and die, to bow in subjugation or to flee into isolation, while all around us all things we took for granted crumble. In this I am thinking of the First Australians. What fear and bewilderment they must have felt when tall ships with billowing sails sailed through sandstone cliffs and into the quiet waters of Sydney Harbour. For those First People, the virus of colonisation spread rapidly. It took their land, their way of life, their health and their lives. It caused and still causes great grief, though in a people that refuse to die, some have developed immunity and some have learnt to succeed in a world alien to their ancestors.

Now, we conquerors experience conquest. We know loss and fear. Many, the world over, do what humans have always done in times of trouble. They raise eyes heavenward and seek divine help. Sadly, some see, in these tragedies, not human loss but self-justification and triumph.

I skim a post on social media. It argues that the virus is one of The Book of Revelation's vials of wrath. I read another post, one of many that write that the

virus is the response of an angry God to a sinful world. It makes me think of the Book of Job. Three "friends" came to "comfort" Job in his suffering and loss. It is entirely carrion comfort that they offer. For them, Job suffers because the Almighty is punishing him for his many acts of wrongdoing. Conversely, they experience good fortune because of their virtuous lives. It is all sophistry and vanity, exposed as the book progresses. Now, millennia after the genius of the Job poet, the vanities of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar are still repeated.

The Tower of Siloam falls where and when it will, on sinner and saint alike. All suffer the vagaries of time and chance. Now we all suffer Covid-19. It visits somewhat indiscriminately. I say somewhat because indications suggest that the poor and people of colour suffer its oppressions more than the wealthy and white.

I also hear on social media this boast as people gather to worship: "God will save me." Perhaps there may be a chance of their survival. But what of those they infect? They do not understand this: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

I say, then, stay at home.

I am lucky. My home is not a prison, nor is my isolation a burden. I share the time with the ones that I love. I face time with my children. I read. I write. I wander my garden. I scratch in the soil. I plant some vegetables and watch them grow.

I think of mortality. I think of what Claudius said to Hamlet: "All that lives must die." I know that one day I must leave and this garden I have made may delight another's eyes. I hope that is so. But in this time of Covid-19, I think also of hope and renewal. Once I wrote this:

we are only our dreams
so why shouldn't I,
with prophets and seers,
float out of my darkened window
on a beam of pure light,
soaring high above the swamp desert
to see, just over the horizon,
a new world rising out of the dark,
that one where justice descends
like the morning dew,
swords are beaten into ploughshares
and peace, like mantle,
covers the glistening earth.

No one knows what the future will bring. Maybe out of this darkness will come something better, a more generous, fairer polity. In Amsterdam post-virus plans are now being designed, focusing on environment and needs. We can plan, we can think, we can dream of a world of justice and equity and from which sorrow and sighing have fled.

But we live in the here and now, in this strange and contrasting world where eagles and hawks fly, the quivering mouse hides in a clump of grass and the rabbit dashes from the approaching shadow. It is beautiful, grand, tender, fierce and wild.

Changing Space

Hina Ahmed

In this unsafe time of Covid-19, we are forced to confront ourselves and the world in new ways. As a result of the virus, I have been quarantined inside my home with my mother, father, and sister for over three weeks now. With our busy schedules we rarely get to spend much time together, despite living together. But this pandemic has reconfigured our family dynamics. The space of our home has become the space of our work, our leisure, and a space that is now facilitating a process inward.

My younger sister will regularly check in on me, making sure the lockdown hasn't completely brought me under a wave of despair. She will often invite me to her bedroom to watch movies on her flat screen TV, which makes me feel like we are, for a moment, in a movie theatre. Together, we share a bowl of popcorn and snuggle beneath the blankets, just like we did when we were children.

The space of my own bedroom has also changed. One way it has transformed is into an art studio. As much as I love art, I rarely find the time to be able to do much of it in my non-quarantined life. But now, I have had the opportunity to dig out the canvasses I had buried beneath my bed, the paints that I had hidden under my desks, and the paint-brushes that were tucked behind stacks and stacks of pens and I have put them all to good use. When I began each piece, I had no idea where it would take me. I was just open and curious to what would unfold. And much to my surprise, each image came to take on a beauty and life of its own. I have now spread these images across my bedroom walls. Each morning when I wake up, the first thing I see are their colours, their inherent energy shifting

my experience in my mind and body. Looking at the images eases my mind, brings me joy and tranquility, and gives me hope amidst the current hardship.

Another way in which the space of my room has changed is that it has now become the epicenter of regular meditation practices in our home. Many years ago, when I first turned to meditation to heal the traumas of my past, I remember my mother and sister looking at me like I had three heads. But today, in this time of uncertainty, they have been called to their yoga mats to meditate alongside me. My mother and sister lie beside me in our savasana, as we all bring our attention to the centre of our foreheads. A space of peace, quiet, and healing opens like a portal within us.

The slower pace of life as a result of the virus has caused me to notice the subtle parts of life that often go unnoticed. Like having the extra time in the morning to hear the coffee bubble and brew, or pausing in front of my bedroom window to see the shifts in the clouds, and the whisk of the wind as it weaves in and out of the branches, or my morning witnessing of the red robins that frolic around the green grass with their full red breasts, hopping from one area to the next; the world suddenly standing still to honor their beauty.

The only time I have really been leaving my home is during my neighbourhood walks. The landscape has changed dramatically. I see the regular walkers everyday with their dogs and children. We always smile and say hello, acknowledging that human life still exists outside of the closed walls of our homes. I notice the cracks and potholes in the pavement, the imperfection juxtaposing the outward perfection of the suburbs. During my walk, I come across a young boy learning to ride a tricycle. His grandmother is behind him, cautiously watching, but

letting him lead the way. He smiles and soars down the hill. I look back at him. My heart stills. We are all home.

Art as an Escape

Ukamaka Olisawe

Last week, I wrote about how I have been coping in this time of the pandemic, especially as a mother who lives so faraway from her children. I am still struggling like everyone out there. I know people who can't seem to function. There are others, too, who just want to go on a walk, or eat comfort foods, or watch Netflix.

We have families who are struggling, too. I live in Montpelier, while my family is in Aba, Nigeria. On most days, I am a bag of mess. I just cry and cry because I want to hold my children to my chest and smell their hair. On other days, I curl into myself and write stories related or unrelated to the pandemic. There are days, too, when all I do is tweet and read other people's tweets about how they are coping. And it is a miracle, this luxury social media has given us, because every time I read how other people are dealing with the pandemic, I am reminded that I am not alone. And it is comforting.

I am currently reading Michael Afenia's colourful "The Mechanics of Yenago," Chimeka Garricks' musical "A Broken People's Playlist," and Grace Lin's brilliant "Where the Mountain Meets the Moon." These books give me an escape from the gloomy news, and with them, I have felt a range of emotions, which have helped with my mental health.

A View of Hope

Chimezie Chika

My first impressions were these cries, asphyxiating and bronchial, that tore through the night and over the bare horizon. There were worn faces, sagging, and tattooed with angry red blotches. Halls that contained endless rows of writhing, twisting bodies on makeshift pallets. Figures in airproof suits, like astronauts on earth.

In my rural home, I had just left the bathroom in the evening. It was six or so. I stared out of the window. The children were there playing as usual, the tiny singsong of their voices rising and falling. Usually, at this time, a barrage of puerile voices shouting "Eromplane, Eromplane" would fill the evening air. Have they forgotten? I looked skywards and strained my eyes for that familiar drone of a plane flying towards Sam Mbakwe. There was none. Only the watery blue sky shadowing a darker blue, like something sinister.

Things used to be so lively around here in the evenings. Apart from the children, you could always hear distant voices from the road nearby, the muted sound of music and vehicles passing. But these things have gradually disappeared as if they have gone extinct over centuries, if centuries could be a few weeks.

I had thought before that the noises carried into my workspace, muted as they were, were irritating. I had imagined a hundred different ways of eliminating them. How about a large UFO falling on that stretch of road where dozens of bukas blared music, ending everything in a big bang? No. That would cause an insane racket of its own. How about a state of emergency? No. That would affect not only the noisemakers but everyone too. How about I wake up and everywhere is

suddenly quiet? No. And the imaginations continue, taking intractable riotous routes, converging, dispersing, converging again, so that each time I think of panaceas to get rid of the noises my head grows hot from the improbability of my imaginings. Over several months, the noises have come to symbolise the forecast of some storm or madness brewing.

Yet, I miss them now, the riot of miniscule noise, the throbbing that connects me to the lively world outside. Sometimes you do not know exactly what stimulates you until it disappears. Some types of noise can be stimulating to writers at work: muted music, the distant sound of a dulmer at work, the sound of passing cars, the cries of birds, so many.

The solitude that writers seek is natural and so is the noise. It has to be something that comes out of the natural machinery of life. It has to be life itself, trudging with typical aplomb, that is, at its own pace, towards whatever it is the world is going towards.

The world hurtles towards the apocalypse. You dream of thunderstorms raging across the hapless earth: female hurricanes and male cyclones destroying civilisation, cities and man's proud erections and innovations. The skyscrapers burn and break down, an invisible giant whose tread shakes the earth strikes his immense axe on the earth and creates deep fissures, deadly diseases suddenly appear from nowhere and kill hundreds of millions, maybe billions, and survivors are few and far between. Humanity is under attack, says the news. Earth is doomed, says the conspiracy theorists in tabloids. This is the earth of pessimistic dreams: flooded cities, abandoned cities, few human survivors going back to prehistoric living, in caves, scavenging, feuding like provoked Neanderthals. Such

is the cycle or the predictions, or the stories. This is also the world of science fiction and the imagined dystopia.

It is frightening that we are living in a dystopia, a world in which science fiction novels have become state of the nation literature, a world we thought is but mere imagination. And it did not begin today. Of course it started long ago. When you realise that George Orwell's *1984* is no longer mere fiction, when you realise that Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* may be just around the corner, or that JG Ballard's *The Downed World* is taking place in many parts of Asia and the Americas, or that the eerily familiar and seemingly prescient *Empty World* of John Christopher is already here, then you will see that we are all living at that intersection between reality and imagination. Something is wrong, and fundamentally so. Does it mean that soon we may not be able to imagine our world in the most outrageous forms because the world is presently morphing and mutating into what had previously seemed the realm of fiction and adrenaline, the improbable?

"It is terrible and it is spreading rapidly." My brother's voice on the phone is panicked. "You have to be careful. The best way is to not go out."

"Of course. Many people are yet to understand though," I say.

I am leaning over the railings of the veranda sipping brandy. I am thinking of what would happen to millions if the lockdown persists. It wouldn't be too farfetched to say that a hunger problem would develop, as deadly as the Covid-19, maybe deadlier.

"Many people must go out before they can eat. Many people live on daily pay."

"Yes," Big brother says. "Yes. That's why this is a major problem for the world."

Such pessimistic talk is not my forte. But things have so spiraled down that it seems we've been watching an unpleasant horror movie that may never end. Some weeks ago, pictures of some of the world's most crowded centres surfaced online. It is almost impossible to imagine Times Square, Tiananmen Square, Trocadero Square, Westminster Bridge, Mecca, St Peter's Square in the Vatican, and others empty. But here we are. The man and the boy are trudging the empty earth, in rags, hungry, dust and debris and ashes and the remains of civilisation flying around, pushing a cart.

Living in a rural environment sometimes anaesthetises the effect of the global pandemic. Many people here are not taking the pandemic seriously. At best they see it as a ploy by the kleptomaniac government to distract the people and divert more funds. The evidence though seems to prove them right. Although the government has closed the markets, and makes announcements via SMS and the mass media, people are still converging at burials, traditional weddings, church services and crusades, flouting social distancing recommendations. Young, who works in a bet shop along the road, tells me many hungry people are actually praying for these parties to take place so they can stuff themselves. Besides this, there is palpable defiance among the people to disrespect a government that disregards the welfare of its citizens. One could go on and on with so much pessimism.

It is not about the government, I tell them, it is about you, your safety. But these are people who seem to believe things only when it happens in front of them. If Mama Amara who sells moi-moi on her motorcycle suddenly contracts a respiratory illness, I am sure panic would erupt here. Until then, the semblance of something normal will continue to persist here, even if with that tinge of background fear that makes us all humans.

The children are still frolicking. I sip my brandy; its hot sweetness scalds my throat for a second as it goes down. On the phone my brother begins a long speech on hope. We, as human beings, he says, must stick together. We must be safe and help one another survive. Yes, I reply.

A little girl wearing only white panties is running at full speed. Her eyes are so bright they look artificial, her skin dark like a lunar eclipse. She rams into a fat-bellied little boy standing arms akimbo and hugs him hard. "They're pursuing me!" She points towards the gate, her hard breath gradually abating. I stifle laughter.

Oh, here it is. Love like that of these playing children will keep us. If I must write, I must write about hope and love in these uncertain times.

The World Does Not End Here

Oka Osahon

In my room, at my window, the curtain opens by curious hands; I watch owls and bats spring from sleep into the rosy blush of dusk, hunting for food deep into the night. They are so free. I once thought that my room would contain me forever, that in my writing, I will find love and companionship. But I was quick to seek solitude, to isolate myself from the world. Now, I want to be free, like these birds, to soar, to roam, unfettered by fear.

This pandemic has changed us, and we are yet to identify the ramifications of its presence in our lives. That a virus would spin our social constructs out of control, disable the supports we have held onto as necessary in such a short time, is indeed shocking, and no one knows what lies beyond the vaccine, beyond the successful recovery of patients in isolation units. Will we go back to the way things used to be?

Will we continue to deride community, disavow family and push away lovers and friends? Will we continue to accept mediocre governments and poor social responsibility? Something has to change and it is my hope that it is for the better.

When I watch the ants lined up, pushing their pillaged profit through holes, across cracked surfaces, I wonder about how life continues in the face of terror, tears and pain. Nature continues on her path, planting and harvesting, birthing and dying, unconcerned about how we rise, how we fall, how we aim for the stars, how we find there only ashes and dust sometimes. It is humbling for us to see that the

world does not revolve around us, to see that with or without us, this earth will continue to revolve on its axis. Is the human race learning anything from this pandemic?

We will beat this pandemic as surely as we have beaten previous pandemics. It is not the end of the world, but it could be an opportunity for change. A question from the ether: can you do better? Can we be better friends, lovers, siblings, sons and daughters, fathers and mothers? Can we be better countrymen and women? Can we rise above the colour of a woman's skin, the shape of a woman's hips, the ethnicity of a man, the size of a man's pocket, his belief? After this pandemic has been dealt with, after we have learnt how it feels to be alone in a world that echoes our anxiety, will we step out of our homes, see our neighbours and turn away our faces in disgust, or will we bring our arms together around them for that long denied hug, that long ignored kiss, that forgotten handshake?

I pray for those who still wander in this precarious time, for the slim pickings to take home to their families—the market woman, the labourer, for the mentally ill standing on the road side, the beggar at the junction, the driver, the waitresses, the vulcanizer, the mechanic, the farmer, the cattle herder, the homeless. I pray, too, for those who stand at the frontlines so you and I can sleep at night, sure that we will see the next dawn—the police man, the soldier, the customs man, the doctor, the nurse, the first responders, the journalist, the pilot, the air hostess and others. I pray that they are supported, that they listen to the warnings that repeat on the radio and television and that they observe the conditions given for preventing a contracting of the virus. I hope that my prayers fill the heaven with fire.

For the pseudo intellectuals, faux scientists, purveyors of lies and dubious conspiracy theories, serenading the gullible public, I have nothing but contempt for you. For those who seek to make a profit from this pain, to swindle with this fear, I know nothing but shame for you. This pandemic will pass. It will sink into our history as another time of solitude, of a restructuring of the social order, and we will remember your role in this time. We will remember all that you contributed to ensure that people did terrible things to themselves in the hopes of surviving this. We will survive and triumph and we will not forget.

I read all sorts of stories, I hear dialogues and I worry about the logic behind purported truths being shared and assimilated. I fear for the uneducated, for the semi-illiterate, for the religious faithful, for the gullible literate fan. I worry that we do not read enough, that we do not want to know and that we do not care. With the platform and regard to do great deeds, some of us have chosen to speak paranoia to power. What is this thing that drives us to be so?

The artist is left with his biggest and holiest task, that of prophecy and prayer. It is necessary for those whom the muses have given gifts to speak truth, to enable the ignorant with knowledge, to push light into the thicket of darkness. We cannot lie down and let silence speak for us. What do I write, I who have always derived pleasure from dark themes? What sort of writer will I be, if I continue to pour my pain down the throat of my reader, amplifying his own fears? Should I cease to write, then, because I cannot adapt to the times? I fear to put pen to paper, to touch fingers to keys, to record my voice speaking verses, for I do not want to speak pain, to speak fear; we have enough of pain and fear here.

Some evenings, when the earth has swallowed the sun and the moon is still lost in the mists, I sit on the swing outside and move with the evening breeze, I

listen to the cars that pass the road behind me, the cars carrying men and women hidden behind face masks and latex gloves. I hunger for the laughter of school children, the raucous arguments of tailors and even, to my surprise, the loudspeakers of nearby churches that used to serenade me with hellfire and brimstone. I want to see pedestrians returning from work, tired and sweaty. I want that noise that says life lives here, but I do not get it. So, I go into my room and write about tomorrow, the tomorrow that I know must come. It is beautiful, this tomorrow. In it, there is life: hugs and kisses; children going to and from schools; men and women in suits and wedding gowns taking pictures at King's Square.

The world does not end here. This tomorrow that I see is as real as today for me. But until it comes, we must endure. We must fight our little fights, embrace our small triumphs, sing our songs, fall in and out of love, and breathe.

What Kind of Animal

Jason Mykl Snyman

There's a place of truest calm, not far from where I live.

A little stream rolls dark and gentle through the verdant draperies, where a footpath follows those winding bends beneath a high, evergreen canopy stitched together with all the trees I cannot name. But through their glowing crowns the sunlight filters down and shimmers across the undergrowth, and it always makes me feel at home.

In the sparser clearings the winter shadows grow long, the birds of prey glide, watchful. Radiant blooming claims the quiet corners. Swooping creepers cling to the branches.

At any time of year, and on any day, the snap of a twig beneath your tread could set an unseen animal to flee, and you'll watch it vanish with a crash into the deeper greens of the forest, and you'll never know for sure what kind of animal it was, and the only evidence of it ever being there at all would be the scatter of the birds overhead as they're shot from their shivering perches.

It'll leave you wondering.

And there's a rounded glade where the wildflowers grow, sometimes. There are two wooden benches there, and from the right seat, at the right time, I've sat and watched the sundown peaks of the faraway mountains light up purple and orange between the trees.

I like to go there when the world grows loud.

And the last time I did, I found an elderly woman there, sitting alone on the wooden bench. She was smoking a cigarette and watching the shadows of dragonflies drift across the grass, one foot slowly bouncing up and down to a melody only she could hear.

This was four days ago.

That bounce in her foot halted far too abruptly for us to pretend it hadn't, and she stared at me from across the clearing with a strange kind of trepidation, and I stared back at her.

This old lady and I, we weren't supposed to be here.

In that moment, as we stood and stared at each other, we realised that we'd probably done a terrible thing. The realisation was a visible one. I saw it in the slumping of her shoulders, and the thinning of her mouth, and the quiet, resigned exhalation as she finally looked away.

We'd ventured out to be alone and found another person there in our special place, and by God, what if this person was infected?

And I found myself wondering if this incompetent old woman had led the bastards straight to me, and if this was how it all ended. Was this how I would finally get myself beaten with a riot shield and arrested, here in my special place of truest calm where I like to go when the world gets loud, and all because I broke quarantine?

And, of course, this was irrational.

The old woman gave me a nod and a smile, took one last leisurely drag of her cigarette, and then vanished in a plume of smoke.

I went straight home, where I've been sitting at my desk ever since, every day, staring straight ahead through the veranda door and into my garden. I used to love this garden, and now it seems unmagical in every possible way, because it doesn't have a little stream running through it at all, and there's no distant view of the mountains to speak of. And the only tree I have, out there, only barely obscures my view of the neighbour's kitchen window. And their kitchen window has that one slat in the blinds that's folded the wrong way up, and it drives me to the brink of madness just staring at it. Their daughter plays the piano, and she doesn't play very well at all, and I don't think she ever will, and now I get to listen to it sporadically throughout the day. Since this lockdown began I've watched the mother fly into the children's bedroom at least three times and beat them for some reason I'm sure I'll never understand, and neither will they. They were fast asleep when it happened on at least one of those occasions, and that's how they woke up one morning, and I can't decide if these things will make them stronger or if they'll turn into broken people. My flowers aren't looking too great and I don't know why. I went out to hang the laundry a few days ago, accidentally looked in on the wrong window and saw a woman taking a shit in her bathroom. She saw me, too. And I've held long, rambling conversations with myself in the shower trying to explain that away, in case I ever see her again, and honestly, I don't think I can. The neighbour above me, I know he's going through a rough time, and I know that because I overheard him on the phone a few nights ago saying that he's just about ready to start sucking dick under the bridge for cigarettes. Caught him wandering around the parking lot all feverish and hunkered down low like he'd lost a contact lens. I can't help but think that—if the global economies actually collapse beneath the weight of this pandemic, and if the world never recovers and we all need to start fending for

ourselves in a post-apocalyptic wasteland—this man, the neighbour above me, wouldn't survive at all. And as I've sat watching from my desk, I've witnessed the rapid, frenzied stirring of every single window every time the sound of a motorcycle cruises into our midst, and I know that they're thinking about those good old days of piping hot pizza delivery and that they pine for it and that they just can't put it from their minds. And I wonder what they eat now. I've heard the children crying. And sometimes I feel like crying, too, because I don't know if Tom Hanks is going to make it or not, and I don't have the heart to dream so big anymore. I don't watch the Covid-19 news because everything seems to be getting so much worse, and I know more about my neighbours now than I'm actually comfortable with.

And I wonder what they know about me.

I wonder if they've seen me at my desk at night with my terrified face illuminated by the cold light of the screen, and I wonder if they've seen my eyes glaze over while I sit and stare at that over-demanding *blink blink blink* of the Microsoft Word cursor.

I should write something, but I can't find my voice in all the noise of this world.

When the Black Death ran rampant in Europe, I wonder if many a writer could do nothing but silently watch it all unfold. I wonder if they'd lost their voices entirely, when the living could no longer find the space or the time or the energy to bury the mounting dead.

I wonder if they said nothing at all when dreadful, deadly mistakes were being made by those in authority.

I wonder if they could make any sense of it in their own minds, when no understanding could be gained of what was happening, and why it was happening, and how to stop it.

And I wonder how they may have felt about that, and how it may have plagued their sense of responsibility, and if it agonized them much to sit alone with their failings in all the quiet moments that followed.

And I sometimes wonder about that old lady and the way she looked at me. The fleeting moment we shared in clandestine, there, in that place of truest calm.

And I wonder if she'd gone out there for the same reasons I had.

In search of all the same things.

And I wonder what her immediate thoughts had been, when I'd appeared so suddenly through the trees, and if they'd been as irrational and absurd as my own. I wonder if that's why she smiled like that, before vanishing in a plume of menthol.

And that moment, in my memory, will always be one of sheerest fear, and purest uncertainty, and deepest humanity, completely without answers and perfect in every way. And if we make it through this pandemic alive, I hope that I never see her again.

Art in the Age of Anxieties

Ikhide R. Ikheloa

What is the role of the artist in the age of coronavirus? What does the artist see, feel, hear, taste in the new sea of anxieties? Who is an "artist?" Why does he matter? Does trauma enforce creativity? So many questions. Maybe we should turn to the great artist, Ben Okri. Hear him riffing in the Financial Times (March 20, 2020) on the questions:

I remember during the Nigerian civil war, which I witnessed as a child, that when the bombs began to fall, and when the family was cooped up in a tiny space, with little food, was when I learnt the most about my cultural heritage, and the lives of my father and mother. They told stories to distract themselves, to amuse us, but mainly to ward off fear. It seems that the more society advances, the more we need this primeval power of storytelling to keep us going. When Boccaccio wanted to tell us what qualities helped people survive during the Black Death, he showed us a group of people travelling through a plague-stricken landscape. Their chief resource was telling one another stories to fortify, delight and strengthen them.

The artist is a human being. The human being is an artist. Sometimes, the role of trauma is to force the artist to listen. There is beauty in pain and suffering. There is beauty in triumph over trauma. But life goes on. The artist is just another human

being enduring one-ply toilet paper because that is the only one he is lucky to get at the grocery store. And Okri's musing reminds me coyly that there should be boundary bending that blurs the distinction among classes. Art is art, from the streets of Lagos, to the highbrow theatres of Broadway. Art is living.

The artist bleeds. The artist hurts. We are at war. For now, the living is art in all its pain. And we live it. And we live through it. My Lover works in the hospital, the virus roams the halls of her paycheck and we never know who is going to be infested next. Our daughter is a doctor in the hospital, brave one texts me about her colleagues infected with this plague. Brave one, our baby, is now grown up enough to be sacrifice for the god of narcissism. Art does not have to wait until this is over. Living and dying are art, yes.

Nothing is new, not even the disaster of this pandemic. Our ancestors before us saw hell, and saw tomorrow, but they endured it even though they did not like what they saw. Our ancestors were their own vaccines. Those who lived to tell the story of that time when people fell off the farms and the hunting trails to their mysterious deaths had no idea what all of that was about. They simply danced to the drums of hope that somehow they would find meaning on this earth. That meaning eludes us.

I found a letter from my mom to my dad about the Asian flu that terrorised the earth in 1957. It was a matter-of-fact letter that went near viral on social media when I put it up. I thought about the bravery of my mom, so young, caring for those too sick to care for themselves. I thought about how romantic it was that she would reach out to her lover so far away. And the cliché about distance making the

heart grow fonder mocked my proximity to my lover. My lover would like to save my life by going far away from me.

My Lover comes back from the hospital and undresses fully in the mud room that houses the washer and dryer, puts the clothes in the dryer and then heads straight to the shower. The kids are in the room avoiding contact with her. I do not have the heart to leave her alone. But it is risky, we are both at risk. Our first daughter is in her apartment in isolation because she has to be in the pediatric cancer ward and since she's seen positive patients. She doesn't want to be exposed to the virus. We don't know what we are doing. This thing can wipe out whole families. But life goes on. I might not be alive by the time you are reading this. OMG, I am such a drama queen. I will survive this and live long to torment my readers and haters.

In real life, I am not an artist, I do play one. I am a bureaucrat struggling mightily to contain this plague upon us. I am what you call a knowledge worker pressing my phone trying to connect resource to resource, resource to the needy. The last thing on my mind is worrying about the poetry of this thing. Yet there is poetry. To relax, I turn on to Fox News to listen to Mr. Donald Trump whom I cannot bear to call my president—I am an American, sadly. I am fascinated by the lush poetry of his ignorance and arrogance. I could watch him forever. This is why he is popular. He has the poetic instincts of a six-year old, and many Americans love that. They love cooing gibberish to toddlers. Mr. Trump is an overgrown toddler.

I imagine things. I guess that makes me an artist. What will the world look like after this? Has Covid-19 manufactured more compassion now that we see clearly the divide between the haves and the have nots? How should we document

it in song? Should we write a book? But then, I hate writing books, because I come from the oral tradition of my ancestors. YouTube. Yes.

We will be fine. I have seen war. And it is not pretty. And I didn't see all of it. But I was an 8-year old with my little brother, a 6-year old, alone in this city that became suddenly very strange and cold without our parents. Biafra. When you survive a war, everyday living becomes war. The anxieties never stop. We will be fine is a cheesy mantra that keeps me sane.

This is not the time to be worrying about writing, or dancing, or theatre. We will sing again, we will dance again, and we will write again. We are doing all that, but we just don't call it art.

Wait, I told you about my mother's love letter to my dad, right? Linda Ikeji put it up right here: [*Author, Pa Ikhide shares love letter his mother wrote to his father during the 1957 pandemic that affected Nigeria greatly.*](#) Read the comments, lol.

Who is Linda Ikeji, you ask? That is another essay. For now, dance the virus away.

Notes on Contributors

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JENNIFER CHINENYE EMELIFE is a graduate of Literature in English. Formerly lead correspondent with *Praxis Magazine for Arts and Literature*, she is now studying for a Master's in International Education and Development at the University of Sussex. Jennifer writes fiction, nonfiction and poetry. In 2016, she participated in the Writivism Creative Nonfiction Workshop held in Accra, Ghana. Her interviews have appeared on *Praxis Magazine for Arts and Literature*, TSS Publishing, London, Olisa.tv, and other creative nonfiction pieces can be found on Daily Trust Newspaper, *Brittle Paper*, *Afridiaspora*, *Deyu African*, *Medium* and elsewhere.

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NEIL CREIGHTON is an Australian poet whose work as a teacher of English and Drama has made him intensely aware of how opportunity is unequally proportioned. His work reflects strong interest in social justice, indigenous issues, the environment and relationships. His poetry has appeared in many places, both online and in hard-copy. He is a Contributing Editor at *Verse-Virtual*. His chapbook, *Earth Music*, was published by Praxis Magazine in 2020. Two other poetry collections, *Loving Leah* and *Rock Dreaming* have been accepted for publication by Kelsay Books.

NNAMDI OGUIKE is a Nigerian writer. He won a Miles Morland Foundation Writing Scholarship in 2019. His debut collection of short stories set in over ten

countries in Africa and beyond, and titled *Do Not Say It's Not Your Country*, was published by Griots Lounge in 2019. It was on the lists of *Brittle Paper's* Most Notable Books of 2019 and Top 15 Debut Books of 2019. Oguike was selected as The Missing State's Author of the Month for March, 2016, and was finalist in the Africa Book Club Short Story Competition of 2018. More of his writing can be found in *The Dalhousie Review*, *African Writer*, *Brittle Paper*, *Praxis Magazine* and *The Wrong Patient and Other Stories*. His Twitter handle is @NnamdiOguike.

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SARAH LADIPO MANYIKA was raised in Nigeria and has lived in Kenya, France, Zimbabwe, and England. Sarah is a novelist, short story writer and essayist and founding books editor for Ozy.com. Her debut novel, *In Dependence*, is an international bestseller while her second novel, *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*, has been translated into a number of languages. Her nonfiction includes personal essays and intimate profiles of people she meets from Mrs Harris and Pastor Evan Mawarire to Toni Morrison and Michelle Obama. Sarah serves as Board Director for the women's writing residency, Hedgebrook. She has been a judge for the California Book Award and the Etisalat Prize and is currently a book juror for the 2020 Goldsmiths Prize. Sarah studied at the universities of Birmingham and Bordeaux, and received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley.

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About the Editor

DARLINGTON CHIBUEZE ANUONYE is a literary conversationist and writer. A 2018 Cesar Edigo Serrano Foundation *Ambassador of the Word* for Nigeria, he is curating (with the American teacher, psychologist and writer, Clarissa Hastings) a collection of short stories and essays that demonstrates the potentials of language and literature to unite the world. He is the curator of *Selfies and Signatures: An Afro Anthology of Short Stories* and editor of *Daybreak: An Anthology of Nigerian Short Fiction* (with the eminent biographer and literary scholar, Ezechi Onyerionwu). The Nonfiction Editor at *Ngiga Review* and Director of Aba Creative Writing Workshop, Anuonye was longlisted for the 2018 Babishi Niwe Poetry Prize. He was shortlisted in 2016 by the Ibadan Poetry Foundation for its inaugural residency. A participant of the 2011 Longman Creative Writing Workshop, he was until recently a temporary staff of the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin, Benin City. He is at present a postgraduate student of Literature at the University of Ibadan. His fiction and poetry have appeared in *Black Boy Review*, *Ovis Magazine*, *Praxis Magazine*, *Coal Magazine* and elsewhere.