

# **BERRIES FROM BRAMBLES**

the pandemic year

**2020**

**ADDISON STREET  
WRITERS CIRCLE**

**#11**



*BERRIES*

*FROM*

*BRAMBLES:*

*THE PANDEMIC YEAR*



*COLLECTION #11*

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*Addison Street Writers Circle, 2020*

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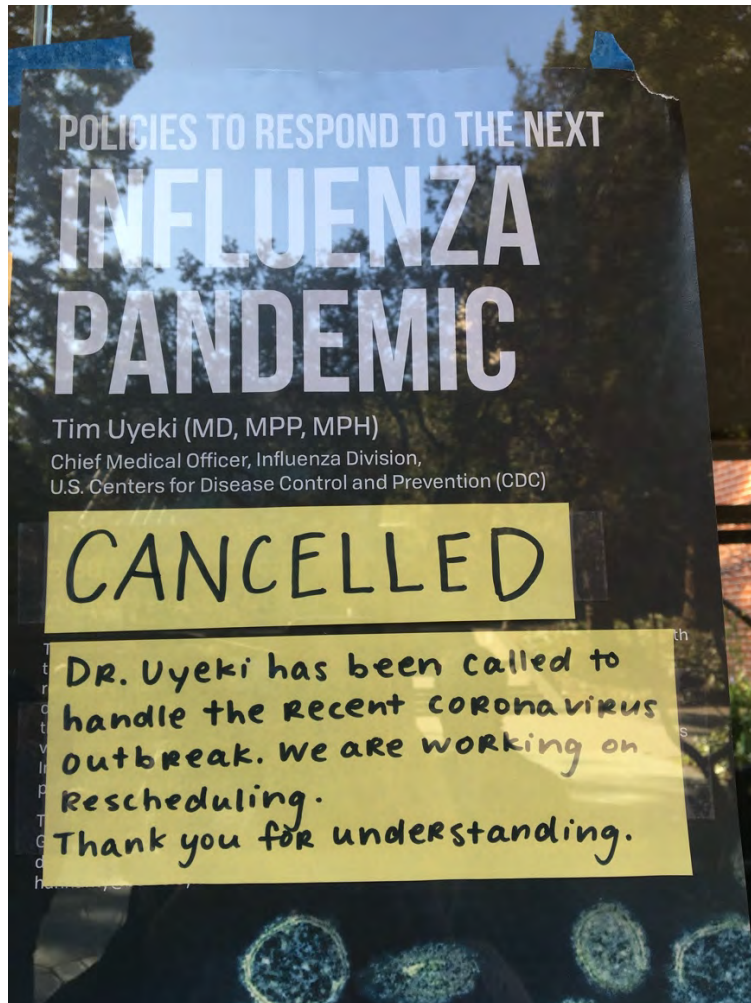




## *PREFACE*

Last December, when we celebrated our tenth year together at a sumptuous pot-luck luncheon and read to each other our *Berries* entries for 2019, we could not have imagined the year that was about to commence.

In early February, we were excited to enter the Cal Alumni House for Kate's whiz-bang 90<sup>th</sup> birthday party, yet some of us noticed the flyer for a lecture on Covid-19 marked "Cancelled."



*Influenza Pandemic Lecture Cancelled Due to Virus Panademic, Feb. 2, 2020.*

As many of these pandemic-influenced writings show, some members suffered dread even then. Five weeks later, the university shut down.

At our last in-person meeting, my initial impulse to hug Anna, our hostess for the day. This was met by a quickly outstretched elbow, both a greeting and a warning. Was that the same meeting where I laughed uproariously (or was it hysterically?), reviewing my journals from the fall movie shoot, and disturbed the group during our writing time?

Soon, we saw the end of our collegial lunches following our writing sessions. We saw each other disappear physically. And we reconstituted ourselves in the Zoom Room. Varied in our adaptation to the technology, and with some members required to be in many Zoom meetings, we often found members leaving as soon as we finished our official time. We reluctantly cancelled our annual Retreat—in our most glamorous location yet. There was wear and tear on our nerves as we navigated the new technology, the isolation, and the larger unknowns.

The overwhelmingly inadequate response of the federal government created more anxiety, especially for those with underlying conditions, which being older, most of us have.

In the Spring, we celebrated the publication of Martina's memoir, *I'm Still Here*, and attended her virtual reading events and interviews online.

As a group, we agreed we wanted to read and hear each other's writing rather than read excerpts from others' work, regardless of how excellent. We honed our editing skills, sent many emails with "Track Changes" attached to an individual's piece-of-the-week. We streamlined our feed-back and commentary in our Zoom boxes to allow for more writing time.

Those who struggled with exceptional challenges made the effort to attend as much as possible. Our pre- and post-meeting gatherings became sources of support in a more vital way than before, though our hands were tied, our arms could not hug, we could not squeeze an arm or give special, directed looks.

We discovered many of us were having difficulty focusing on our writing. It was as if the noise of the pandemic broke our concentration. One technique that worked well was to return to old drafts and polish them up with the help of the group's commentary. Another was to chronicle our days, as much of this *Berries* will attest. Martina's "flash memoir" technique showed us this way to keep at writing without knowing where it would lead. We encouraged each other when we faltered, kept on despite losing our moorings.

Here are some of our writing-related highlights for this most unusual year, 2020:

Sue Ezekiel has continued to develop pieces inspired by her family.

Karen Grassle negotiated, then signed, a contract with She Writes Press for her memoir, *Bright Lights, Prairie Dust* to be published in October 2021. She also joined the Authors' Guild, and took the seminar given by the Op-Ed Project.

Ruth Hanham continues to work on memoir, humor, and her two historical novels.

Eleanor Lew took the seminar given by the Op-Ed Project.

Vivian Pisano published her personal essay, "Sacrificing Sleep for a Night Out" on the *Next Avenue* website February 24. She held a reading at the Tomate Café in Berkeley with poet/photographer Alan Bern. In addition, she completed a working draft of her memoir, which was read by Anna Rabkin and Martina Reaves, as well as others and sent to a professional editor for manuscript assessment.

Kate Pope focused on completing and polishing various memoir pieces that she had developed over the years. We expect to see them in print before long.

Anna Rabkin's memoir, *From Kraków to Berkeley: Coming out of Hiding*, continues to bring unexpected surprises. In France, a long-lost relative read it, got in touch with her to say that his mother had kept a diary during WWII which he found and which will be published. In England, author Deborah Cadbury (of the chocolate family) read the book and called to interview Anna for her new book about Bunce Court School, the first boarding school Anna attended on arrival in England after the war.

Martina Reaves memoir, *I'm Still Here*, was published by She Writes Press in April. She has won the Gold Medal from Living Now (Grief/Death and Dying) and a Silver Medal from Readers' Favorites (Nonfiction: Health/Medical). Martina has an excellent website [martinareaves.com](http://martinareaves.com) with more information about her book and links to other writings.

Linda Sondheimer published her essay "Drunk Dad, Sober Dad" in the anthology, *Through a Glass Darkly: Lenses on Life with Alcohol Addiction*, ed. Claire Heinzelman, self-published with Pencil Pusher.

Maryly Snow successfully negotiated all editions of *Berries from Brambles* (past and present) to be collected for the permanent collection of the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. We remain honored to have



*Berries From Brambles* accepted into this august library, while we're equally curious to see how it will be cataloged.

It's a testament to our perseverance, organization, and loyalty that there is a *Berries* for 2020. But there is. And here she is.

*KAREN GRASSLE & ANNA RABKIN*

## *COVIDITIES: PANDEMIC THOUGHTS WHEN ANCIENT*

### *BEFORE THE PANDEMIC*

Refusing to be daunted by my imminent ninetieth birthday, I signed up for a three-week trip to Colombia and Ecuador. The departure was a year away, in March 2020. “I’ll be up for it,” I reasoned as I sent off the check, “I’m going on that trip to Oman later this year in November. I’ll be just a little older in March.”

In the infrequently-touristed country of Oman, our tour group floated up a coastal fjord, walked in the high mountains, and slept in desert camps. Twice I had to turn back on adventurous trails that I dearly desired to pursue to their ends, but otherwise, despite my diminishing balance and a couple of knee replacements, I kept up with the group.

Safely back in Berkeley, the Christmas festivities sped by, and by January I am looking forward to my 90<sup>th</sup> birthday party. But I am a news junkie, and the news is not encouraging. Along with monitoring the burgeoning climate crisis and the global trend toward authoritarian dictatorships, including in my own beloved country, I read about the outbreak of a virus in Wuhan, China. “That doesn’t look good,” I think, but I am too focused on my landmark celebration to dwell on this possible third crisis, a distant virus.

February 2<sup>nd</sup> arrives—02/02 of 2020. The U.C Berkeley Alumni House is filled with my exuberant family and friends. We cluster elbow to elbow at round tables, and hugging is rampant. As I am about to launch into my welcome, I muse inwardly that the dreaded virus is here. We may look back on this gathering with heightened gratitude. But I don’t give words to negative thoughts that would only dampen our happiness on this joyous afternoon.

### *MARCH*

As my March 13 departure for South America gallops toward me, I am enmeshed in a web of denial and fear. In the denial state I happily prepare for my trip: update my shots, fill a malaria prescription, trial-pack my travel bag and download the trip itinerary onto my iPad, savoring the romantic colonial buildings and lofty Andean peaks. In the fear state I chart the relentless advance of the new virus. I understand the threat of cases doubling and redoubling, the phenomenon of “logarithmic growth,” but I persuade myself that I can shoehorn in an 18-day trip before the virus gets really bad.

Denial is still edging out fear when, on the morning of March 11, I receive a “Dear Mom” email from my daughter-in-law Polle. She lays it out in stark language:

*It has today been declared a pandemic...Three weeks ago Italy had about the same number of cases as the Bay Area now, and today they are shutting down the whole country...*

Lots more follows—multiple links to *Washington Post* articles and information about the nasty things Covid-19 might do to your lungs. A six-alarm fire! And I hear the sirens. That afternoon I email family and friends that I have canceled. I tell them I fear that I will get the virus in a country with skimpy health services and not be able to return home. Finally, I admit I had way too much confidence in my own invincibility and I’m sorry I made you anxious.

Two days later—I would have been flying!—a national emergency is declared, and the governor declares a lockdown for Bay Area counties. I rush to buy groceries. By the end of the day I am hunkered down for the long haul except for one last task, three days later, of filling my near-empty gas tank. I would fill it again four months and eleven days later.

## *APRIL & MAY*

I feel optimistic about the apparently endless months ahead. To start, I’m the kind of person who is happy with a good book, permission to putter and time to take walks. I don’t have a job to lose because I’ve been fully retired for ten years. Then there’s the great good fortune that I am sheltered (that’s the new language now) in a comfortable, cedar-paneled house that was built by my father and mother eight decades ago. I live alone which might be a slippery sled ride to loneliness, but I have five children, three of whom are within an hour of my house. Also, I rent the lower level of my home to a young couple, and so I’m alone but I do not feel alone. Still, I would be in sad shape were it not for my support network. My five kids sprinkle me with loving concern about their 90-year-old mother not catching the virus. Son Rob and daughter-in-law Mimi bring me Costco groceries and, best, a visit on my back porch. My young tenants fetch me kale, spinach, mushrooms, avocados, red romaine, and more from the Berkeley Bowl, and text me when bags of fresh produce are waiting at the top of the stairs that connect my main level with their separate downstairs apartment.

My sequestered lifestyle is quotidian: writing, reading, neighborhood walks, sketchy cooking, weekly laundry, napping, DVDs, “The News Hour.” These are leavened by the sociability of occasional back porch visits, six feet apart, and a monthly, small-group trail walk, properly distanced. What saves me are Zoom-enabled connections; thank the Goddess for the technology! I meet with family, two

book groups, a discussion group, and my weekly writing group. On most Wednesdays, I have a precious hour at 11:30 a.m. with my British-American friend, Lesley, who has just eaten supper because she is living in England. On Fridays, I chat with cousin Frances, who lives crosstown in the Northridge district. In the pre-Covid time, we would have breakfast and a walk together maybe twice a year, but now we vent weekly on Zoom about politics and the climate, and we share our fears and frustrations.

### *JUNE & JULY*

I am chatting on the phone with a friend who is a local real estate agent. “The market has stayed high,” she exclaims. “You would think it would sink with the pandemic, but it hasn’t. One reason is people in San Francisco who are cooped up in tiny apartments. They want out, and they’re flooding across the Bay.”

I imagine being cooped up in a cramped apartment, and I flinch, blessed as I am by the good fortune of daily walks in the Berkeley Hills—even though I occasionally have to browbeat myself to get out the door. My excursions are enlivened by news about the outside world conveyed by signs that blossom in the late spring: PROUD GRADUATE, CLASS OF 2020, along with the name of the high school or college—a rite of passage on a yard sign. An occasional forlorn BERNIE or WARREN sign is left over from the primaries, and after the George Floyd murder, BLACK LIVES MATTER signs burst forth.



*BLM sign on Keeler Avenue, July 8, 2020.*



Some have obviously been carried at local protests and now hang from a fence or in a window. Others are more durable like the sturdy rubber mat, a yard wide and two cars long, stretched across a wide driveway.

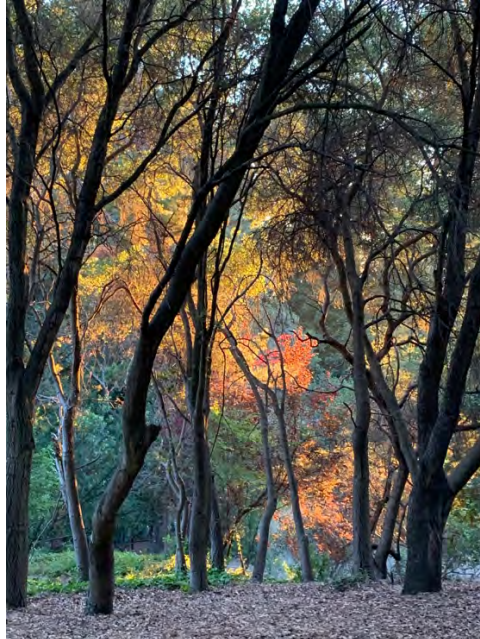
I look, too, to see if my neighborhood is changing. Before the pandemic, I rarely saw babies or small children when I walked, evidence to me that growing families couldn't afford the rising house prices. Now I am happy to notice parents with a small child in a backpack or stroller, or I pause to decipher colorful chalk drawings on the sidewalk. I speculate: maybe the young parents are simply more prosperous, or maybe some time ago they moved to my neighborhood and I see them now only because their parents are home full time. I look, too, for change toward increased racial diversity, and whenever I sight an Asian couple or a Black face, I celebrate inwardly.

In the early weeks of the pandemic we walkers often waved at each other in mutual solidarity, but this has faded lately. The traffic flow has changed, too. In March and April, moving vehicles almost vanished, and the streets were lined all day with parked cars. The sky turned an intense blue, and I became blasé about crossing normally busy Euclid Avenue right at the bottom of my driveway. Lately the traffic has noticeably picked up, but I still can cross Euclid without a crosswalk in the evening.

My favorite time to walk is the hour before sunset and "last light." I ease out my front door, stride down my long driveway, and only after maneuvering the steep curve at the bottom and reach Euclid Avenue do I decide whether to turn left or right. The other night I chose left, downhill to Codornices Park a block away. At 8 pm the fog was drifting across the Bay and in scattered skeins overhead. I didn't wear hat or sunblock at this hour, and I lifted my mask up over my nose whenever I spotted someone coming toward me.

A few folk straggled in the growing dusk. On the grassy slope that leads down to the playing field, a couple with a baby in a baby carriage were packing up. I crossed Codornices Creek on a bridge, took the diagonal path along the hillside, and soon I was peering down at a squealing child hurtling the curves of the concrete slide toward his waiting mother. What were they doing out so late? Beyond, at the redwood grove, I glanced across another fork of the creek and spied a man seated on a picnic bench despite the yellow tape that telegraphs, "Forbidden." In the dim light next to him I discerned a medium-sized backpack and the outlines of a two grocery bags filled with who knows what? Was he homeless? Would he find a nook in which to lay down a thin sleeping bag after I leave?

I chose a high path which crooked back above my earlier route. When I reached the dell where the black trunks of the oak trees were twisted like dancers, I turned back because it was too steep ahead to descend without my hiking poles.



*Trees at sunset, Codornices Park, July 22, 2020.*

Again, I spotted the solitary man on the picnic bench. I wondered, how many in Berkeley were, right then, looking for a place to hole up for the night? This lone man, was he someone who lost his job and couldn't pay his rent because of the virus? I plunged into a reverie as black as the trunks of the oak trees: homelessness, pandemic, the narcissistic reality-show president threatening our democracy, the climate crisis roaring unchecked...our country was in big trouble. But I broke out of my black mood. The air was gentle, and it was getting dark. I retreated to the haven of my home.

## *AUGUST*

Do I miss the small gym where I've worked out twice a week for 14 years? Truth be told, I am enjoying the feeling of playing hooky, but I worry about increasing aches and rigidities. "I'm just getting old," I tell myself. "New territory, never been here before. I wonder if I could have handled that trip to Colombia and Ecuador?" Doubt of my physical capabilities is creeping in. Or is it realism? I sign up for a weekly online movement class.

I look in the mirror. The light is shining across my face, and there are so many wrinkles! And my hair, normally clipped stylishly short, is a disheveled haystack. And it's definitely getting whiter by the month. When I was a lot younger, I had imagined that when I was in my nineties, my head would be framed by a glowing white nimbus, but this is a nimbus gone haywire. I resist the temptation to hack the five-month-long growth with my own scissors and a shaky hand.

Not only are my wrinkles rampant and hair awry, but I have been napping an inordinate amount of late. What is going on? Might my contentedness be a thin veneer for a smoldering depression? I mull on this grim possibility, and my resiliency slowly collapses.

In this dark mood, I snatch a tiny packet of dark chocolate and escape out the front door. I need about a mile of walking up the intersecting streets that climb above my house before I can comfort myself with the obvious. I am simply on overload. The pandemic is the basic stock for a recipe of dire ingredients: the George Floyd killing in June, more police killings that trigger more Black Lives Matter protests that trigger right-wing and then left-wing violence, the paralysis and craziness in our capitol, my huge anxiety about the outcome of the November election, and the devastating blazes in California, a climate crisis tinderbox. Raging complexes of fires lie to my north and south, Red Flag warnings alert and alarm, smoky air wafts like an evil fog, and my Go Bag is ready because my house would go up like a torch if a fire swept up our canyon. I worry, too, about family members who live on the edge of evacuation zones in Livermore and in Nevada City. Into these, stir the back-to-back political conventions that underscore the desperate divisions of my country. Finally, season this stew with a dash of an unexpected lull in Zoom conversations this past week. No wonder that my balance tipped, and my resiliency is in free-fall.

But nothing stays the same in this roller-coaster life. The smoke dissipates, the political conventions recede into the past. Wanting to contribute more than money, I volunteer for voter phone calls, and I go on delicious walks in the fresh evening air. My spirit soars. Then the smoke is back with apocalyptic deep-orange vengeance. Unhealthy air fouls our lungs for a week, white ash spackles my back deck, and I despair about the worthiness of human beings to survive on this glorious planet that we are so maltreating. We have a heat wave, and after my walk, my T shirt is so sticky with sweat I can hardly peel it from my back. Finally, the sweet air, the cool early morning fog and the blue sky return. Nirvana once again.



*Sunset from Cragmont Rock Park, August 11, 2020.*

### *EARLY SEPTEMBER*

“I was thinking of your birthday party, back on February second,” says cousin Frances, “That’s the last time I was in a big group.”

“That was such a great party,” I reply, “No social distancing, no masks! I got to hug everyone as they arrived.” And we indulge in reminiscences of when we were ninety persons in one big room, the group singing, and you’d just walk up to the bar or buffet and help yourself.

Once we get this pandemic under control with a vaccine, I know those pre-Covid times will return. Until then, I am anchored by personal happenings: Zoom dates on my calendar, great grandbaby #2, a wee girl, due on Valentine’s day, a grocery delivery, and back porch visit. And when it comes to my haystack hair, trimmed by me around my face, the truth is that, as a child, I wished fervently for naturally curly hair. Now I get a kick out of the novelty of locks that curl gently around my collar.

*KATE “CRICKET” POPE*





## *IN TRANSIT DURING COVID: MONDAY, AUGUST 31, 2020*

After several days of ninety-six degrees indoors, my furnace roared back to life in the middle of the night; the temperature had dropped thirty degrees. My cell phone alarm woke me at 7:30 to a chilly, foggy morning. I lie in bed thanking nature for sparing the Bay Area another terrifying dry-lightning storm. I do my stretches, wash, dress, drink a glass of water and am out the door by 8:35. The smoke that had kept me inside for two days has cleared.

Thrilled to be liberated from the pandemic and smoke lockdown, I walk downhill on my familiar route; frighten a couple of deer, cross paths with a rafter of turkeys; share the street with a few cars and no pedestrians until I arrive in downtown Berkeley. Aiming for the 9:16 BART train, I make it with 2 minutes to spare. I wear a fabric mask with a bandanna overlay—extra protection since I am using public transit. I need not have worried; my BART car has people spread out more than six feet apart.

At the Oakland MacArthur station I catch the shuttle which allows only every other row to be used for seating and only one passenger at each window. Deposited at the MacArthur entrance of my destination and finding it closed, I walk down Broadway to the back entrance, where I sanitize my hands, tell the guard where I am going and make my way to the elevators. At the lower level I am checked in, asked to fill out a consent form, and wait to be called. After a few minutes, my masked young guide arrives, takes my form and shepherds me down a long corridor. He asks for my name and date of birth. He smiles at me. “For 85, you certainly are in good shape.” “Thank you,” I smile back, “I do a lot of walking.”

In a cubicle I undress down to my panties and shoes, put on a hospital gown, stash my belongings into two clear plastic bags and wait outside for my guide. After a couple of minutes, I am brought into a large, cold, sterile room, a sci-fi overhead machine hanging over a cot where I lie down. Covered by a cotton blanket straight out of warming oven, I think, *This is the best part*. The technician explains that she will take two sets of pictures, one without and one with a dye. I’ve been through this before, I know what to expect. I notice an IV on my left arm, I didn’t feel even a pin prick. The machine moves over me. “Breathe in. Hold.” Ten seconds. “Breathe out.” This is repeated a couple of times before the dye streams through my body. From head to toe a hot flash floods every nook and cranny and leaves a metallic taste in my mouth. “Breath in. Hold.” Ten seconds. “Breathe out.”

My second-year follow-up for cancer surgery complete, I return with my plastic bags to a cubicle, shed the gown, dress, dump the bags. Outside the radiology area I find the nearest water fountain to rid myself of the dye's unpleasant after taste and to flush it out.

Back on Broadway, I see the 51A bus leave the stop across the street at Mosswood Park. The Broadway side of the park has an array of neat tents, like a campground in the middle of the city. A large communal table with an awning over it, seems to be a food distribution point. No one in sight, except one man who is busily sweeping the sidewalk. This is the best kept tent-city I have seen.

Since I know the wait will be fifteen minutes, I decide to walk. Few pedestrians, but many new sights to take in. I feel like a tourist—Oakland is changing fast—several buildings under construction. I have to cross the street a couple of times because of blocked sidewalks. I reach Auto Row and beyond; evidence of protests all around. Many windows and doors have wood panels nailed over them; some decorated with new attention-grabbing murals; mostly around the theme of racism and police violence. Posters proclaim Black Lives Matter and hand-written signs announce Black Owned Business.

By the time I reach 20<sup>th</sup> Street I think the 51A should be coming again. Sure enough, one picks me up in a couple of minutes; few passengers, all masked. The bus driver is sequestered from the passengers by a couple of rows of empty seats and yellow CAUTION tape. The bus turns on 7<sup>th</sup> and Franklin, and I am a few blocks short of my next destination.

I get out and dread the four blocks I have to walk on Broadway; across a freeway off ramp, under the wide, thundering highway, both of which make me jumpy; past not well-tended tents, spewing garbage onto the sidewalk, but no people.

When I arrive at 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, I feel my body relax. I cross Broadway and smell roasting coffee beans. I pass the venerable Marcus Hardware where I shopped many years ago for hard to find equipment, and arrive at the block long Mr. Espresso. The front door is closed, so I walk through the plastic curtains of the loading entrance. To my right is a window to a little office. "Employees only" it announces. A woman at a desk notices me, smiles, puts on her mask and comes out.

"May I help you?"

"Thank you, yes. I would like to buy a pound of Decaf Espresso."

"Oh, did you try the front door?"

"It was closed."

"No problem, I'll get it for you. But it will be a little less than a pound. And we don't have any organic left. Will that be ok?"

"That's fine, thank you."

"I'll be back in a few minutes."

I sit outside the office and observe the unfamiliar warehouse activity around me. A man wheels in an espresso machine. I wonder if it needs repair? Another brings in big sacks—what's in them, coffee beans? Along one wall, sinks, counters and several coffee making machines—a testing lab? Otherwise, shelves and shelves of cartons sit ready for shipment. I feel refreshed, out of the monotony of daily routines and surroundings.

"Here you are, and it will be \$15.50."

I give her my credit card and, fortunately, peer into the little paper carry bag and notice the packaged coffee is regular. When she returns from the office, I explain that I need decaf.

"Sorry. No problem." She takes the package and exchanges it somewhere in the bowels of the warehouse.

Mission accomplished. I have been meaning to buy Mr. Espresso decaf since I had it at the Cheese Board in Berkeley before Covid. It was the best decaf espresso I had ever tasted, but only available through the warehouse.

Leaving Mr. Espresso, I think about lunch at a German restaurant on Jack London Square, but it is 11:30 and I know I don't have enough time before my next appointment at 3701 Broadway at 12:25. I forego playing tourist on the waterfront.

Instead I walk to Broadway and 2nd and wait for the 72 bus. Having just missed one, I have plenty of time to take in the scene. Outside the Crooked City Cider Tap house I watch a restaurant worker assiduously swab the outdoor furniture to prepare for the lunch bunch. At the bus stop a man in a wheelchair is soon joined by a tattooed guy. I watch a small weed transaction take place. Suddenly a ragged man with no mask comes very close to me as if to say "This is *MY* sidewalk." I resist his challenge for me to say something about his lack of a mask and he moves on. A car arrives, the driver goes into the restaurant, the weed seller approaches the woman in the passenger seat—seems like they know each other. After the return of the driver with a to-go bag, the car drives off, and my bus arrives.

Only one masked woman besides me on the bus. Reluctant to shout my question at the sequestered driver, I ask her, "How far up Broadway can I go on this bus?"

"To 20<sup>th</sup> and Broadway. Where are you going?"

"Broadway and MacArthur."

"You can take the 51 across the street."



I thank her and as I get out I see the 51 across the street depart. Instead of waiting I walk up Broadway, stop at a supermarket to pick up two jars of my favorite black current jam, and continue walking.

Fortunately, I am only five minutes late. After the front entrance check-in, it is only a few steps to a largely empty waiting room. I register and after a few minutes sit at a phlebotomist station. I feel the needle stab my right arm. I squeeze my eyes shut, avert my head and undergo what some in my family irreverently call the “vampire procedure.” Another task checked-off my to-do list.

Back out on Broadway I wait for the shuttle to take me back to BART. The Richmond train arrives at 1:15, gets me to Berkeley downtown at 1:25 and I make my 1:30 bus connection. I am home at 2:00.

“Traveling” for five-and-a-half hours, I have clocked my goal of 10,000 steps. I feel victorious to have accomplished everything I set out to do, except for having lunch. Hungry and tired I have a quick bite and take a nap.

I used to be a world traveler. I thrived on the heightened awareness of the unfamiliar and the concentration needed to find my way in foreign cities, learning to use public transit, witnessing culturally different, but ordinary life unfold before my eyes. In transit in Oakland brought back memories of the pleasures of discoveries, of conquering fear, becoming part of the daily flow of life. My Oakland expedition broke the dull routine of sheltering-in-place since March. Though only a couple of miles from home, I was out of my cocoon in a world of boundless possibilities; an urban adventure—informative and invigorating.

*ANNA RABKIN*

## *COVID'S MARCH*

Friday, March 6, 2020.

Packed and ready to go! My second trip to San Ignacio Lagoon, the southern home of gray whales, to whale-watching camp—where the lagoon meets the sea, a camp of white canvas sleeping tents, outdoor sinks, solar showers, sawdust-lined porta-potties, a huge tent for three meals a day.

Done! And two nights ahead of time! I zip closed, just barely, my trusty wheeled duffle-bag crammed with my travel CPAP machine and its external battery pack, clothes for hot weather, cold weather, and water, water, water since we'll be on the lagoon in open-air, out-board motorboats called pangas twice a day among the whales.

Yeah, yeah, so my nose has been running all afternoon and evening. So what? Even though my sister Nancy, with her terrible cold, had to drop out, I still have three friends joining me to celebrate my 75<sup>th</sup> birthday on the water. I am eager to be up close and personal again with momma gray whales and their babies. It's late in the season when the jealous males have begun their migration north to Alaska, leaving mommas and babies more available for close encounters: gazing, touching, patting, rubbing, kissing those gentle giants.

Happy with my accomplishment, I dutifully alert my travel mates that I packed my cold meds and they should consider doing the same. Then, cozy with self-satisfaction, I call it a night and go to bed.

Saturday morning brings a different reality. Carol and Susan suggest that just maybe, perhaps, I should reconsider: we'll be in very close quarters, in open-air pangas, canvas tents for sleeping and eating, and no medical facilities on the remote Baja Pacific coastal desert. Oh, those two are so careful. I remember seeing them sitting in their kayaks in flat, still water, far from the wave action while I was riding surging waves on a rocky coast. Yes, they are more cautious than I am. About to dismiss their caution, suddenly, I realize they are right: I have an obligation to my friends. If I got sick with a cold, they, and then the other twenty whale-watchers could get sick, all my fault. China's Wuhan epidemic has been everywhere in the news. Still, it is way over there, not here, but we have been thinking about transmission, catching

and spreading infection, aware that the Chinese government covered up the warnings of Dr. Li Wenliang, who died from this virus, COVID-19.

Meanwhile, friend Martina sends a text suggesting 15 seconds of deep breathing every morning to keep our lungs strong (later rescinded as an urban legend.)

All day, emails, including some from Angie, owner of the camp, fly back and forth. Yes. No. Yes. No. Maybe. By late afternoon, resigned, I bow out.

Ironically, I don't get a cold: it was just an old person's runny nose!

Monday March 9, 2020.

The *Grand Princess*, a huge cruise ship carrying 4,600 passengers and crew, some infected with the novel coronavirus, has been stranded, circling for four days outside the Golden Gate, awaiting permission to dock somewhere, anywhere. But no one wants the virus on their shores. Eventually, she is given permission to dock in Oakland's Outer Harbor, south of the Bay Bridge at Piers 22-23.

I am in my studio, listening to the radio, trying not to mourn my lost whale encounter while coloring repetitive patterns for my fifth *Paradox Challenge* drawing. It's structured around five interlocking circles on beautiful Fabriano paper.

I feel proud of Oakland for admitting the beleaguered cruise ship; its San Francisco home port along the Embarcadero is too crowded, too urban for an untamed virus, while Oakland remains the scrappy, hopeful city, secretly yearning for the respect of her big sister across the Bay. Oakland is being generous, as she always has been, allowing sick quarantined passengers and crew to dock.

Slowly, as I add some blue to the interlocking circles, it dawns on me: I won't see this on TV because I don't have one yet, and this is happening right now, right here in West Oakland where I am, so I might as well try to see the Grand Princess in person, in real life.

As I drive toward the port, I wonder what propels me to search for a contaminated quarantined ship. Am I intentionally putting myself in harm's way? Am I foolishly ghoulishly courting danger? Or, trying to tamp down fear by making this real? Or, searching for the sea to replace my lost whale time? Or showing my support for Oakland's generosity? Yes.

I turn west onto 7<sup>th</sup>, wondering whether I will find her, the *Grand Princess*. Then, turning right onto Maritime, I hear myself name this adventure "*Searching for*

*the Princess.*” I laugh aloud, amused by the irony: exactly who is this princess, this princess that the world fears? Which princess anyway? Isn’t she the one driving the car...?

Suddenly I see the monstrous ship, the distance reducing her to a postage stamp. A driveway entrance. I turn into it. A man wearing a bandana face mask but no uniform abruptly steps in front of my car, his body language urgent, waving me away, yelling, mask muffled, “Private! This is private property! Private property!” I turn around, leave.

Across the street, I join five men with giant cameras standing silently on the corner, probably photographers, newsmen. Standing with them, I look across the wide Maritime thoroughway, down the entrance toward the port, through the parking lot, past the loading areas, to the still tiny-appearing ship.

Quietly I ask one man, “Have you seen anything?”

“Yes,” he whispers, “about a hundred ambulances in a long line.”

I try to visualize a hundred ambulances, but can’t. Then I wonder, *Are there even a hundred in the entire Bay Area?*

“One hundred ambulances?” I ask incredulously.

“No, about twenty,” he corrects.

“Oh.”

Then he says, “There’s a better view of the *Princess* down Burma Road.”

My brain wobbles briefly as I wonder, *Where am I anyway that there is a road named, incongruously, Burma?* I drive along Maritime, towards the Bay Bridge, to Burma, where yes, there is a better view of the ship, still very far away. I clamber down a wide gravel swale, up a short dirt embankment to a paved area where twenty reporters and cameramen stand eerily silent amid their black tripods, reflective screens, and humongous telephoto lenses. Occasionally I hear a reporter broadcast, most of them saying the same thing: “The *Grand Princess*, infected with coronavirus, after days of circling beyond the Golden Gate, has finally docked. The offloading of passengers is expected to take several days. The crew will remain quarantined aboard the ship.”

Poor crew.

I drive further down Burma Road where I find an even better view of the *Princess*, see her entire broadside, still far away across the Outer Harbor and Key

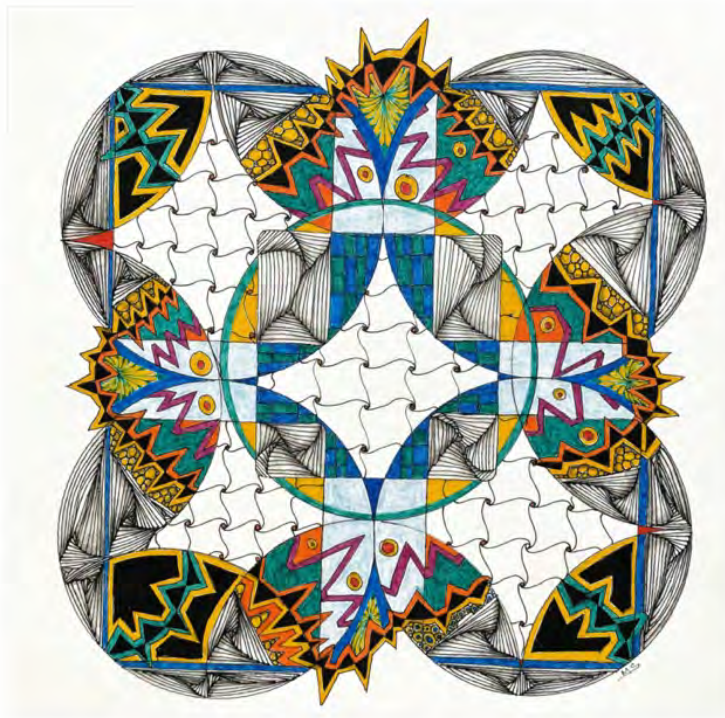
Route Basin. No looky-loo boats here, no canoes, no kayaks, undoubtedly never allowed. Here, curiously, where there is room for hundreds of reporters, there are only two. One man holds the edge of his reflective screen from flapping in the wind. The other stands in front of a music stand turned podium, his back to the ship, note pad and cell phone where music usually sits, a curly earpiece in place. No one speaks, we nod to each other.

Eventually podium man breaks the silence, spewing forth a rapid-fire report in a foreign tongue, his brow furrowed with seriousness. I'm agog, wondering how he can even move his tongue and mouth that fast. Finally, I hear "...*personas... dias...*" They tell me they are the Spanish arm of CNN.

I head further down Burma Road to its cul-de-sac. There, a direct view of Yerba Buena Island, and San Francisco's skyline with its Salesforce Tower. Curiously, no reporters, no onlookers, just me, plus one East Bay Regional Park ranger. No, he's not patrolling, just double checking that the brand-new fence at the brand-new Judge John Sutter Regional Shoreline Park (that's a mouthful!) was installed correctly. The ranger proudly describes the trail that parallels the Bay Bridge Trail until it splits off to the left, leading to a new 850' long public observation pier. The pier connects the three old concrete marine foundations left in place from the former Bay Bridge. This pier gate still locked, I return to my studio.

Friend Robin arrives. She thinks *Paradox Challenge #5* looks "electric." She's right! I add a subtitle: *Electric Grand Princess*. I change the series name from *Paradox Challenge* to *Pandemic Paradox*.

Each one of my drawings uses a repetitive pattern known as Paradox. Each is created within a structure of five interlocking circles. My challenge is to see what I (as well as my Zentangle group of six other women) can do with that pattern in that structure. But it's also paradoxical that I escape to my studio to draw repetitive patterns as a calming visual meditation while listening to horrible, horrible news on the radio during this global pandemic, thus *Pandemic Paradox*.



*Pandemic Paradox #5: Electric Grand Princess*, ink and graphite on paper, 10.5" x 10.5", 2020.

It's hard to say what makes doing these drawings so calming. I think it is primarily the engaged hand-eye-brain trio that opens up my mind and heart space to listen to the news. Maybe the repetitive nature of tangle drawing occupies and absorbs me just enough to keep me from crashing down a rabbit hole of despair. Plus, they're fun and easy to do. Usually my eyes can't focus for very long, so I end up wearing two pairs of my prescription reading glasses.

Monday, March 16, 2020.

Six Bay Area counties enact the nation's first shelter-in-place regulations. Am I allowed to go my art studio? Who would stop me? I doubt that art is considered essential, and I expect I'd go anyway, but, just in case, I scan the Alameda County Public Health sheltering-in-place requirements. Apparently one can leave home to

get groceries and gasoline, go to the hospital, and to feed an animal. Good, I'm allowed to continue feeding Bobo Lanky, "my" skinny old alley cat.

Whenever I feel cooped up at home, I make an outing: to the walking path behind my house, to the grocery store, to my art studio where I continue my *Pandemic Paradox* drawings.



*Pandemic Paradox #7*, ink and graphite on paper, 10.5" x 10.5", 2020.

When I climb to the broad path behind my house, my cat George follows me. He stops to listen, sniff the air, alert, while I wait, then call him. He comes loping towards me, tail high in greeting. A few days later George's sister Goldie (aka Princess Lotsafur) timidly joins us. I walk backwards videotaping them on my iPhone, posting these short videos on Facebook and Instagram. Sweet, endearing light touches in this scary time of a world besieged by a new plague, the novel coronavirus, COVID-19.

Monday March 23, 2020.

After a stranger points out that my brakes are squeaking, I call my auto mechanic Jim (who had been my lover twenty-eight years earlier). Yes, the shop is open. Yes, they can look at my brakes next Monday, 1 p.m. Life goes on. Sort of.

About to drive into the garage, I see a sign that directs clients to park outside, in the lot. Hmm, this is new. Probably to limit contact. I park, walk inside to the service desk, see two glass windows pulled down close to the counter, open only enough to pass keys and credit cards underneath. Hmm, this is new too. A sign on each window states that the windows are down for everyone's safety. There are few cars, only two mechanics. I slide my keys through the opening, then turn toward the waiting area—four chairs, a table with magazines, fully open to cars and mechanics. I feel unsettled. Those chairs. Have they been wiped down? Who has sat there? Those magazines? *People* magazine with Tom Hanks on the cover. He'd tested positive for the virus. I want to read about him, but, but who has touched the cover before me? Is it safe to touch? Has it been disinfected? I walk over to the big lounge chairs, my purse slung over my shoulder, suddenly too heavy, burdensome. Where can I put it down? Where is safe? Nowhere. The circle of scruffy recliners seems ominous, all potentially harboring the virus. Back at the service counter, still lugging my purse, I see a disinfectant dispenser. Hmm, that's new too, pull out a sheet, return to the chairs, wipe one down, the table top, the magazine cover. Gingerly I sit, still unsettled. This place, in which I've always felt comfortable, suddenly seems uncertain, risky. I feel my heart pushing against my chest, too hard, too big for the space inside my ribs, like it wants to burst out.

Eventually Jim explains that my brakes are good, but yes, they still squeak, come back when things return to normal—we can grind and degrease them later. Relieved, I drive away, to my studio in West Oakland, when suddenly I decide that a walk around the Emeryville Marina would do me good, lift my spirits. I find a perfect parking spot, a view of the Golden Gate Bridge directly ahead, the Bay's waters choppy and gray. I turn off the engine, listen to the radio. President Trump says we'll get through this. Calling himself the war president, he hypes hydroxychloroquine and the Z-Pak, his voice tiresome yet, as president, necessary. Then I walk out into the cold blustery wind, strands of hair blowing in my face, heart still thumping, still physically uncomfortable. I decide to cut this walk short, go to my studio.



Oh no! My car won't start! Check the ABS system! Check the VSA system! This has happened once before. All I had to do, then, was wait about an hour without listening to the radio. But instead of reaching into the glove compartment like a calm, capable woman to find the number for roadside assistance (at least an hour wait in a cold car), I call Jim instead. Near tears, voice high and whining, "My car won't start. I have roadside assistance through my insurance, but, but I don't remember who insures my car, I don't know what to do," my voice breaking, crying a little, trying not to sob. He can barely hear me, the wind so blustery. Try this, try that, he says, but nothing. Dead car. He'll send someone out soon. Jerry arrives, wearing the face mask I'd seen on him earlier. He jump-starts my car, points to a label that tells him my battery is five years old. "Come back to the shop. We have a new battery for you."

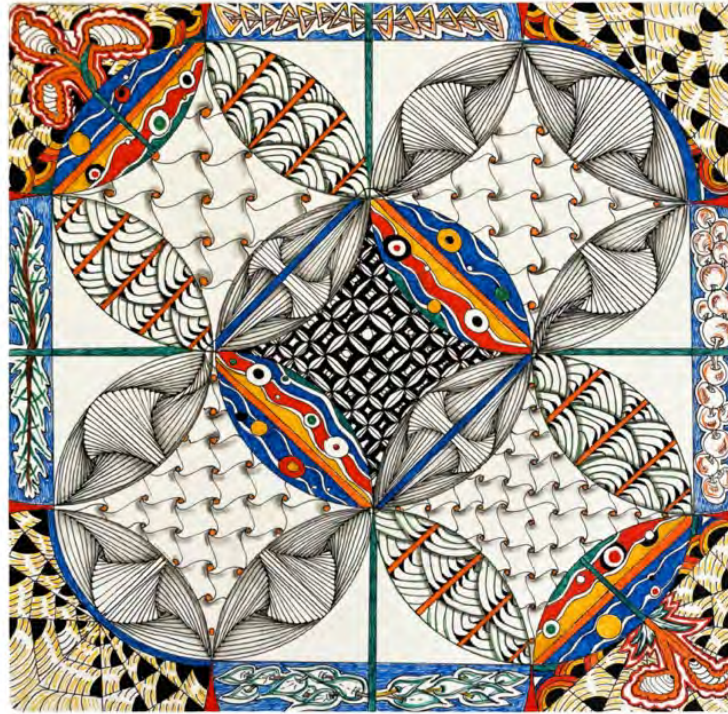
I do. Jim, standing ten feet away, has been so nice, and all I want is a hug, a reassuring hug. No hugs.

Once home, neighbor Jen texts she's taking the baby girls for a walk. Do I want to come along, six feet away? Yes! Taylor and Riley are in vitro babies just three months apart from two married-to-each other moms. Jen pushes their stroller up the steep dirt mound to the walking path behind my house. She teaches science remotely. Her partner Emily also works from home, their two nannies still coming into the house. I feel better, nearly normal. All is well.

An email from Dean. He manages my investments at a large firm. He too had been my lover. That was twenty-four years ago. I had asked, "Should I sell everything?" The markets were crashing. Four senators sold millions of dollars of stock on insider information, making me wonder, why not sell everything now, buy it back when the markets reach their nadir? I knew Dean would caution me to ride it out. He does. His subject line makes me laugh:

"Sell everything? No way! Turn off the TV! (and that crazy doomsday guy on social media)."

He gently advises me to weather the storm, his tone sweet and caring, the closest thing to that hug I needed. I tear up, then soon find myself sobbing. Sobbing alone in my house at the end of the road.



*Pandemic Paradox #8*, ink and graphite on paper, 10.5" x 10.5", 2020

*MARYLY SNOW*

To Be Continued . . .



## *THE STRANGE NEW WORLD OF VANISHING OBJECTS*

I'm sitting at the kitchen table, wrapping a present and reach for the Scotch tape holder when, lo, it's no longer there. I glance around: still no Scotch tape. Could it have fallen on the floor, without my hearing it? I peer down. No Scotch tape there but lots of little flecks of wrapping paper. Darn, why didn't I remember to use the waste basket? I straighten up and paw around some more among the clutter in front of me. At last, lo and behold, it's Eureka time! As I lift up a length of wrapping paper, I spot that darned Scotch tape, smirking at me.

Did the Scotch tape disappear in this way thirty years ago? It must have but I think in those days I simply shrugged it off as one of those minor irritants of life, not worth bothering about. But now? Every time something vanishes, it becomes a portent of what the textbooks call mild cognitive decline. And we all know where *that* leads. To the big A and life as a living eggplant while your relatives moan about your lost marbles and worsening disposition and will soon be wincing at the bills from the Cognitive Care Unit at the Redwoods Senior Living Community for Vibrant Maturity.

I ask myself when exactly it was that objects began to disappear in this disconcerting way. I can't name you the month or even the year, but I've become used to that sort of amnesia about time. I only know that more and more of my possessions keep vanishing. I can't find the birthday present I squirreled away for fear of its being discovered by the recipient. Not to mention a certain comb that I could swear I put in the second drawer in the bathroom cabinet. I can't find the almond extract in my kitchen cupboard. Until I notice it's in the waste basket, I can't find that glossy brochure for the upmarket retirement complex, the one with the cover photo of a white-haired model sauntering down the beach with a grizzled Adonis in a well-cut navy wind breaker. And most infuriating, I can't find that cup of half-drunk coffee until I discover it in the microwave.

I now understand why in past centuries folk believed that the devil made off with this pencil or that spool of thread. But how can I, a product of the skeptical twentieth and twenty-first centuries, have the nerve to blame such an outdated villain as Mephistopheles? Wasn't I raised to be a rationalist? Do I really want to tumble down the Staircase of Enlightenment into some Celtic Twilight of superstition? The answer is, I don't.

So, what can good old common sense tell us about keeping objects from making themselves scarce? Well, if you stop to think about it, it's the smallest and most portable things which stray most often. As we miniaturize more and more components of our daily lives, we are creating a world of tiny parts which are getting harder and harder to keep track of. Is it any wonder that a pill the size of a lemon seed, a pin as puny as a porcupine's spine, a contact lens the size of a dollhouse saucer, should go missing so often? Why, the merest careless swipe of the hand can send something hurtling toward—well, you tell me. I happen be down on my knees, trying to find the darned pill I just dropped.

Why should eyeglasses, which are so much more substantial than contact lenses, vanish so often? I've come to the view that like chameleons, they tend to take on the color of where they're left. Maybe this is because their lenses are clear. But if that's the case, why should dark glasses disappear just as often?

For many years I used to ponder why gardening gloves and flower-cutting secateurs—which aren't exactly miniature—have such an annoying habit of vanishing while one is gardening. But then the answer came to me. In the spacious void of the Great Outdoors, how can one NOT lose large as well as small items? What other domain furnishes so many hiding places? Think about it. Layers of leaves long to conceal anything, not to mention that shadowy area under the backyard magnolia tree or those springy insides of the front boxwood hedge. It's as if you and I were asked to play Hide the Thimble in the whole of Yosemite Valley or fly like a butterfly in the very heights of the sky.

Or consider a beach: an assemblage of trillions of grains of sand, concealing God knows what Lost Property. In an airplane I once sat next to a man wearing so much gold, he looked mythic, like a Greek god who had plundered all the treasure of Troy. A gold bracelet on each wrist, four gold rings on his fingers, two more gold rings on a chain around his neck. He confided to me that his weekend hobby was trawling the beaches of Florida with a metal detector. I felt a pang, thinking of the agonies of those who had lost their wedding rings on the white sands of Lord Knows which of Florida's beaches. But it did drive home to me the dangers of exposing our tiny treasures to the wide, open spaces of Mother Nature.

Shouldn't our homes, by contrast, prove an easier place to locate lost items? You'd think so. Like me, you probably try to apply that hoary old saying about having a place for everything and everything in its place. I've yet to find anyone who disagrees with this principle. Yes, divided though we may be by vast differences in political

outlook, most of us would subscribe to this commonsensical credo. Even I, who count my blessings all too infrequently, have thought to myself: blessed be the front hall table where the car keys are kept. Blessed be the front hall chair where my purse is deposited. Blessed be the mantelpiece to which my husband and I entrust those key medical lab forms.

Which leads me to wonder: might things improve if we had more such sacred spaces? Possibly. But I suspect the root problem resides not in too few such spaces but in too little self-discipline to route objects to said spaces. Or am I being cynical?

Might lists help? You'd think so. I myself excel at making lists—to sound just a little bit boastful. Yes, you'd be impressed by the many I've made during the last few years. I've itemized which gifts for which people I'd hidden where, and which gifts I gave them in the past so I wouldn't give them a second time. I've made an inventory of the contents of those mysterious boxes on the top shelf of my closet. I've noted down which drawer in the buffet holds the small dipper for gravy and which, the triangular spatula for serving cake. The only trouble is, these lists have fallen into the spirit of my household and gone missing themselves.

Yet some deep, instinctual wisdom has always made me convinced that a solution to the problem of disappearing objects will eventually be found.

And it has! The actual winning strategy occurred to me just last night as I was combing through the newspapers, trying to locate an article about Russian ice breakers in the Arctic. My idea was so startling yet so simple that I knew I must note it down forthwith. So, using the back of an envelope holding this month's gas and electric bill, I did. Trouble is, when I went to look for that envelope this morning, I couldn't find it. It must have slipped between the pages of newspaper because I simply can't lay my hands on it. As soon as I do, I'll give you a call. If I can find my phone, that is.

*RUTH A. HANHAM*



## *COVIGNETTES: MOVING INTO A NEW ERA*

### *MY NEW NORMAL*

Last night I had a dream, nothing extraordinary as far as dreams go—just full of what you wouldn't find in ordinary waking life. A couple of friends and I were walking on a path. I was walking my cute little rat, which, by the way, looked like no normal rat. He waddled. He had little round ears, and big, sad eyes. So cute. Its face reminded me of a racoon's, mask-like. As we walked along, I noted a sensation I had never before experienced: the fear of touch. My dream mates and I took care not to touch anything someone else might have handled. A railing, a stick, any and all objects were suspect and cause for fear, even each other. Did I touch my face after forgetting that I shouldn't have touched the bench others had sat on earlier? Are we keeping enough distance from other hikers, from one another as we walk?

I have passed a threshold: the COVID world has crossed into my dream world. The new, waking life normal is now my new dream normal.

In just six months the corona virus has upended life on this planet and, for me, degraded the already-dwindling trust in the political system. Social ills and evils are magnified. Political forces that elevate the privileged and submerge the downtrodden are exposed. The stock market and unemployment rates rise together. Government officials are replaced by criminals, shady stakeholders, supporters of the regime. Fealty is valued over competence, knowledge, and intelligence. Healthcare hangs by loose strips of gauze. People die in isolation. Doctors, nurses, health workers save and lose lives while endangering themselves and their families. Police commit murder again, and again. Social, environmental, and health programs begun in the last administration are plundered. Racism is exposed again, and again. The man on top calls the shots.

We are living through a time where a line has been drawn. The before and the now.

"How are you doing?" I ask my friend. "Every night," she says, "I pray—and I'm not religious!—that we don't have an earthquake right now."

Emails now sign off with "Stay healthy" and "Be well."

Every morning since the lock down, I assess my physical state. Yes, I feel the same as I did yesterday. No, I have no symptoms. Not yet. Maybe tomorrow or next week, next month. Who knows?

I read stories of the sickness, and of people who have been intubated. Don't put me on a ventilator, I tell my doctor.



Each morning I pick up the two newspapers delivered to our home, wash off the plastic bags, wash my hands and attempt to read them. In the before time, I would read entire articles. Now, I look at headlines. Too depressing, too infuriating to read much else.

I turn my focus to signs of hope. Amidst the chaos I see empathy and kindness. Activism emerges. People are protesting. They are donating. They are voting. They are demanding change, causing change, creating change.

The before, however flawed it was, I know, will not come again. This is a time for reflection, regrouping, finding a new trail, changing course, new dreams; time to mobilize, time to call for healing. Don't look back and mourn.

### *MORE COVID DREAMS*

Since COVID world has established itself and entered my sleep, my nights eerily echo the anxiety dreams of my high school days. Back then, I'd find myself outside in a crowd with only a small hand towel to cover my nakedness. Now, having forgotten my mask, I attempt to cover my naked face with my blouse, my hands, but with little success. Or I'm in a crowded hotel reception area and people with masks wear them loose, falling down below their chins. Others are mask-less. People crowd around me, close to my face and I can't turn away. Stop! Let me out of here, I'm suffocating in my own mask. I wake, face uncovered, and take a deep breath.

### *DAY 129*

On shelter-at-home day 129 I go for a too long-delayed swim. I, who have been swimming regularly for thirty years, can't remember ever having gone so long without a swim. "It's a great aerobic exercise," people say. But I'm used to swimming and don't feel it as an excessive aerobic exertion. True, a bad night or a couple of weeks away from a pool affect the ease of my swim. I may move slower, breathe harder but can get up to speed after a couple of days.

I wistfully look at my much-loved local pool in Berkeley, now closed: so tempting! The aqua blue surface, undisturbed, transmits the sun's rays as if a lens magnifying the pool's floor and debris that had settled there. The few pools that are open are far from home and with new rules and procedures: Reservations only; masks to and from the water; 45-minute time limit; no showers, no changing room, no loitering. Making an online reservation at the Walnut Creek Pool, I find, is no easy task. Reservations are available one week in advance, to the hour. After a few failures, I learn to hover my computer mouse on the "BookMe" button the moment my computer clock turns the hour. One-half second too late, and all the reservations are taken. At 11:00 a.m. my finger slips slightly, and I'm too late. At 12:00 noon, I click

when I notice the clock showing 12:00 but still not quick enough. Then, with my eyes glued to the clock, my finger on the mouse positioned at “BookMe,” just as 12:59 turns into 1:00, with shaking index finger, I click. Finally, success. (Didn’t I go through this same procedure back when airline check-in opened 24 hours in advance of the flight? The fastest clicker gets their pick of the best seats.)

One week later, after the 25-minute drive to Walnut Creek, I line up with the other fast-fingered swimmers while the roll is called. Then we are led single file, masked and 6 feet apart, through the entrance gate to the pool and, like musical chairs, we each claim our lane.

As I look at the length of the pool, I wonder what it will feel like now, after over three months of no swimming. I’ve gotten physical exercise other ways—online workouts at home that exercise the full body, walking the neighborhood, parks, uphill and down. But still, I’ve missed the water, the smooth silky feel as I lower myself into the pool and push myself off to glide into my strokes.

I swim easily, for the first few laps. Then I feel my heart racing. Only ten lengths and I have to stop. Then I stop every eight after that, and I’m finally too winded to swim my usual 54 lengths.

Is swimming my  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile a lost memory, or just on pause to be resurrected over time? However this part of my former life turns out, swimming, like most everything I did before, is changed by new rules and restrictions and my own stamina and perseverance. Accept it, I say to myself, and move on.

### *YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION...<sup>1</sup>*

I’m coming up for air, struggling to take a breath, my lungs filled with gurgling, desperate with need. I sit up, mouth open wide, muscles straining but still cannot find what my lungs yearn for. Rising higher, lifting myself, I cry out and awaken. Sweet breath, air, suddenly nourishes my starved lungs. A dream recedes and vanishes and leaves me thankful, for now. Whatever dark images I had are gone, until the next time. No fluids in my lungs. I am grateful.

But yet, I can’t allow complacency. I must be vigilant, my dream warns me. Tomorrow may not be the same as today. Change is constant. Disaster can come to my doorstep too.

I sense an earthquake of change. Our democracy is crumbling. This “president” throws rocks at it, while his supporters cheer him on. By bullying and blaming and threatening and provoking and by his own violent actions, he floats above the law, while his cronies buoy him up. This president, this interloper, has proven he

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<sup>1</sup> “Revolution,” The Beatles

can make up his own rules and sue to bring down anyone who dares resist. And his disciples twist some legalistic statement to justify what their leader says and does, even if yesterday, he said and did the opposite. Our tyrannical leader is the one person who matters, the one individual to whom we are accountable: the one whose very name sends shivers up my spine. I could suffocate on these thoughts.

Uncertainties today—about the pandemic, economy, democracy, climate, and the whole world’s state of affairs—have upended my assumptions about the future. Resist, revolt, rebel? Accept, ignore, surrender? Empathize, comfort, assist? I try not to despair, while my head spins.

There’s something happening here

What it is ain’t exactly clear<sup>2</sup>

I write 50 more postcards to disenfranchised voters, urging them to exercise their right to vote. I make one more donation to the Democrats, to Black Lives Matter, to the local food bank. I can do more.

For I am one of the fortunate. Paul and I take care of each other. We are healthy. We have trusted friends and a caring yet small family. We have a home, and friendly neighbors, plenty of nature walking paths. This is where we want to live. We have sufficient and tasty food, modest needs and we lack no resources.

I make no assumptions. Losses will come. The king continues his campaign of failure, until he is stopped. I resolve to do more, as others do too. And I will dream another dream, and another, if that’s what it takes.

### *A WOMAN AT HER WINDOW*

In the early morning, before the neighbors are out, before the dog walkers and the hikers, before the squawking crows claim the soundscape, I savor the serenity outside my window. I sit at my desk next to our front window. I spend a lot more time here since the sheltering-in-place order—writing, Zooming, reading, going through my mail, or just fiddling. And looking out the window. A hummingbird flits about the *Lavatera* outside. Neighborhood cats lounge on the street in the sun. I’ve even seen two proudly strutting wild turkeys meander through the yard across the street. A pane of glass separates me, anchored inside, from fowl and fauna, undisturbed, taking dominion over my street.

Paul and I live at the end of a short cul-de-sac. Six houses, three on each side of the street, comprise our little neighborhood. Occasionally a car enters the cul-de-sac intending to drive straight through to Sacramento Street. They can’t. When we first moved here over 35 years ago, a car slammed into the fence at the end of our street determined to find a shortcut. No one was hurt, but the car and fence were both

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<sup>2</sup> “For What It’s Worth,” Buffalo Springfield

damaged. Now, at my window, I watch cars maneuver elaborate turns to return to their path. Some back up and give themselves enough space for a U-turn, others execute a series of backing ups and going forwards until they can turn their car around, still others use our driveways for their maneuvers. Once successful, the angered ones peel away as if attempting a wheelie they would do on their bicycles.

I've had lots of time to study street happenings. One neighbor takes out her lawn chair and, with refreshment in one hand as the other holds a phone to her ear, she sits in the sun to participate in business calls. When she visits with another lawn-chair friend, the six-foot space between them fills with chatter. I open my window to let in the music of their laughter.

Parents like our street. Their kids can race around on their bicycles and scooters without fear of fast cars. Our recently paved cul-de-sac is a rare smooth surface for them. Not so the cross street at the end of the block, which resembles a country road, rutted and with loose gravel.

People walk their dogs placidly on my street, taking in its ambient serenity. I glance out to make sure pet companions don't leave poop in our gardens. So far, they have taken their responsibility seriously. Other wanderers, without dogs, come down our street just because it's quiet and welcoming. A few times I've seen walkers stop and wave to the woman at her window. I wave back, whether or not I know them. One couple stared and stared at our house and when I opened the window, told me how much they liked our cute little house. I smile with thanks, silently agreeing. Small kindnesses lift my spirits.

Neighbors must consider me a busybody, peering at them as they go in and out of their cars, but we give each other a friendly wave. Or, I open the window to say hello, how are you doing, we are doing well, considering. We chat, then go on with our business. I exchange hello waves with our trash collectors, mail carrier, and occasional delivery workers. People are friendly, we share an understanding about distress.

My mind meanders from the tasks I set out to do. I find it hard to concentrate on my writing, reading, and desk work. I glance at my To Do list. Time to check off some items; the list is getting too long. My To Do list has turned into a Hope To Do list. I might as well just cross some items off; I'll never get them done. And so I turn to my window to soothe my mind.

### *MUTABLE TIME*

Of course I know what time it is. I'm attuned to the time of day by my sleep rhythms, hunger patterns, energy ebbs and flows and, of course, the clock on the wall, the watch on my wrist, the time on my phone and computer. Reminders are all around me. I

know the year we're in: every staggering news event cannot but remind me. The months announce themselves by their seasonal changes, weather patterns, life stages of plants, and cyclical animal behaviors. Are squirrels digging in our potted plants to bury vittles for winter, or are they taking bites from mid-summers' still-green apples on our tree, only to throw them down on the ground rendering them inedible for us? Yet indicators of seasonal patterns wear thin as summer extends beyond its borders. Looking out the window I yearn for the typical Bay Area fog of summer. Lightning and warm showers in August? A Midwestern climate has introduced itself to us. But here in California, lightning brings dreaded, uncontrollable fires.

Confusion at the more granular levels of time is new to me. At opposite ends, the year and the hour are clear. As the seasons begin to blend, the months lose their footing. And now I'm having trouble remembering the day of the week and its numerical date. Since Tuesday, March 17, 2020, time has lost its progressive, even flow for me. Now, more than ever, I depend on outside clues. My newspapers come in handy here. Miss Manners appears in Monday's *San Francisco Chronicle*. The Science section of *The New York Times* comes on Tuesdays, and its Food Section on Wednesdays, at which point I stop whatever I'm doing to look for and if there, read Pete Wells' latest column. He's as entertaining as always, although more forgiving of restaurants that manage to operate under new, restrictive conditions. On Thursdays, the *Times*' Style Section appears, and goes directly to the recycle bin. I'm not interested in wearing \$500 sequined stiletto sneakers and \$600 pre-washed, frayed and torn-at-the-knees faded blue jeans. If it's Friday, the Datebook appears as its own separate section in the *Chronicle*, having been appended to the Sports page on other weekdays. There aren't enough events and spectacles for either section to require more than a few pages. I recognize Saturdays by the very thin edition of the *Chronicle*, and Sundays by the fattened paper straining its plastic cover and the Pink Section peeking through.

Hours slow down as time moves forward. Yet on looking back, the hours and days have raced ahead to now. What did I do yesterday that I always do on that day of the week? Didn't we just listen to our Sunday evening radio show a couple of days ago? Nope, that was a week ago. It's Sunday again. And Friday and Saturday flew by me without marking a place for my future recollection.

This is not my failing memory, or confused state. These are not just signs of aging. For this is not a normal time. These are signs of failings beyond my personal control that nevertheless control me and what I do.

VIVIAN PISANO

## *WE ARE HAPPY IN OUR WAY*

If ever there were two more perfect candidates for a pandemic lock down, than Fred and I, well then, I just don't know who they could be. We returned from a trip to Boulder in early March, just as this Corona virus was getting into full swing and having its way with our country. That trip to Boulder was our last, world travelers that we were. My husband, Fred, has Parkinson's disease. The rocking of the train to Denver was uncomfortable for him and the plane home was also fraught. His disease, exasperated by a Focused Ultrasound procedure in February, made it clear that there would be no more travels. Staying at home is just what the doctor ordered, so to speak.

I felt oddly safe and fortunate in our new sheltered days, a privilege indeed. We are retired. All of our busy doings—concerts, plays, ballet, dinner dates—canceled. Fred's slow ways and vague notion of time was always a stress point for us. NOT having to get him out the door in a timely fashion or oversee his safety in public has been a relief. We have had travels of beauty and camaraderie; places I read about in schoolbooks as a child and places I could not have dreamed. I do not feel deprived. I can remember our roaming days happily from our sofa.

This catastrophe seemed so odd, it is a disaster for so many people, there is grief and anger rampant in our whole country, our economy is broken, a generation of children with disrupted educations, our standing in the world is hash. And yet here the two of us were removed and safe in our home, with lots of groceries. We could not see the monster, er well, the monster in Washington, yes, but we could not see the monstrous virus coming at us all.

In the months since February, there have been oh so many changes, and they came fast and daily. After our return from Boulder we planned for changes. Fred and I cuddled on the sofa and shopped. We ordered grab bars for the bathrooms, toilet risers, an extra walker. There was a brief time when we thought safety-izing two bathrooms was the way to go. That plan grew moot quickly. I will skip over the many medical details of Fred's trajectory; suffice to say that these past five months have included; two interventions on Fred's brain, four serious falls, injuries including a subdural hematoma, visits from the EMTs, a few ambulance rides, three weeks in rehab regain the strength to stand, and a plethora of changes to our home and routine.

In Fred's absence, I happily pitched myself into transforming his den. Fred planned for this when he built this post-fire house twenty-six years ago. There is a full bathroom with a step-in shower. The Sons came over and we swung into action. Marc, Josh and I took advantage of Fred's absence to really get some work done. We removed the sofa, and file cabinets. We began going through a closet of stuff, old

electronics, magazines, blueprints, files upon files, slicks from many investment shows, old x-rays, stuff and more stuff. We worked all day. Once the big stuff was removed, they loaded up the trunk with all the junk I could muster and took it to the top of the driveway for bulky waste pick up. They did little chores that felt big when they were all weighing in on me at once. Marc got on the computer, paid bills and redistributed money for the monthly budget. Josh fixed a loose doorknob. Marc put the tennis balls on the legs of the walker. I love these guys. I love watching their chemistry. I don't know any adult siblings who have such a wonderful rapport. They are comical. Josh rummaged for useful items, Marc avoided acquisitions assiduously. It was my birthday that day, and it was a sweet day spending it with them. We FaceTimed with Fred in the ICU. We had carrot cake on the patio.

These past few months have reminded me of the introvert I always was; staying at home is quite agreeable with me. I spent three weeks cleaning and outfitting Fred's den. I am very good at throwing things away. I am the keeper of the calendar and the concierge for visiting nurses and therapists. What did we do today? Well, we took a shower and got dressed, ate three meals and I read a book on the sunny sofa. We are sleeping later.

Caring for Fred can take up a lot of the day, but I don't mind. I cannot create a vaccine, I cannot tar & feather Mitch McConnell, I cannot fit Donald Trump with an orange prison jump suit, I cannot stem the high tide of bigotry. I cannot save this Democracy. In fact, I am embarrassed to say that I am overwhelmed and have been avoiding reality and politics. All I can do is take care of Fred.

Recently we were visited by daughter, Michele, and her daughter, our granddaughter, and my drawing buddy, Alana. After months of working and schooling on ZOOM, they took a road trip to California to see family. They were both tested before they came out, a responsible and considerate act. Michele and Alana spent a week with us. I noticed a transformation. Alana, who was never too aware of chores to be done, got in my ear and said; "We're here to serve. What can I do to help you?" And indeed, Michele and Alana replanted a forlorn flower bed, cleaned up the succulent beds, helped me assemble patio furniture, made great dinners and did little projects in the house. I felt spoiled with their company and help.

*SO, ALANA, MY DARLING, LET ME SHOW YOU THE RECIPE FOR GRANDPA'S BREAKFAST . . .*

- 1/4 cup instant oatmeal, flatly packed, into the bowl, followed by 1/2 cup water, full; get a little surface tension on that water.
- Slice the berries.
- Put hot water into the cup to heat it.

- Put the muffin in the toaster: push the lever down, not too soon, not too late.
- Put the bowl of oatmeal in the microwave for 1 min.14 secs. If you've done it right the toast will pop up just as the oatmeal is done.
- Butter one half of the muffin, lightly, not too close to the edges, same with the jam. Keep the butter and jam to the center lest sticky fingers be the result.
- Pour the coffee, add precisely half teaspoon of sugar substitute and stir.
- Sugar the oatmeal, add berries and serve.

Fred will eat so slowly that midway through, he will ask for his coffee and oatmeal to be reheated in the microwave for 30 secs. And for the second half of the muffin to be put down again on the *warm* setting. Repeat as above.

The full breakfast service arrived incrementally. It started when Fred's tremors made buttering the toast difficult. Then, Fred could no longer handle the measures without spilling. When it was just the two of us, he put up with me "ignoring" him with my crossword puzzle, while I waited on him hand and foot, mind you, and I put up with MSNBC on TV. We bonded in our homebound way.

The Shower: Over time Fred became too jittery and unstable to feel safe in the shower. It became a mutual endeavor. Downstairs we have a two-person shower. I was with him, to offer him a hand for balance and wash his feet. He sat on the little shower bench more and more. But now, Fred lives upstairs in his transformed den. His shower has been outfitted for his safety. It is just not as commodious for two, but that's okay. As with everything, each step, in order, slowly, meticulously. A shower and dressing can become the main event of our day.

### *AND YOU KNOW WHAT ELSE?*

I have arthritis in my feet. I had been going for periodic cortisone injections to ease my walking. With the distractions of Fred's needs and the lock down, I stopped going. Whoops. I now echo my own grandmother as I hobble around, winching and crackling with cantankerous ankles. Don't tell anybody. I recently went back for those injections as things were getting bad. It helps but I don't want the only other alternative; a surgery which would have me off my feet and in a cast for two months. I don't love my sofa that much.

### *MY NEW, MOST OBJECTIONABLE HABITS*

COVID lock down and caring for a person who is now limited has produced some revolting new habits. Once, I was loath to accept bags of any sort from the grocery store. Once I was loath to allow paper towels, or disposable napkins or plates in my house. I used my own tote bags for shopping and reusable rags for cleaning. Once I



was loath to shop online. I would be virtuous and support the jobs and local tax base by shopping at the stores in my area. Not to mention the carbon imprint of all those delivery trucks and cardboard boxes.

Forget that. That was the old days. I have been shopping up a storm from my sofa; hospital bed, a plethora of bathroom safety items, over bed table, small chest of drawers to fit in the closet, a wheel chair, a specialized walker for Parkinson's patients, new bedding, an add-on handle for the car door, new pajamas, a reading lamp and a remote control to pair with it, a new router and TV bracket for Fred's room, even new lightweight patio furniture that would be easier for me to care for... and it ALL came in cardboard boxes. I could build a Trump Tower of cardboard. My new hobby is breaking down boxes for the recycling. If our nation ever recovers from COVID we will find ourselves buried in cardboard from our online shopping. I developed a Pavlovian relationship with my front door. I cannot pass by without peeking outside to see what has arrived. I was rewarded more often than not with packages big and small. I am on a first name basis with the mail man, the Fed-ex man...

And disposable wipes... I sanitize left and I sanitize right; Fred, bathrooms, kitchen, everything I touch in the grocery store, etc. I wipe and toss, and toss, and toss. UGH.

### *GRACE AND GRATITUDE: MORE THAN I CAN SAY . . .*

A 300 pound mechanical bed, bolted to a 100 pound wooden pallet, showed up at the top of my steep driveway and the driver was flummoxed. His delivery truck was too big to come down the driveway. *Lady if I roll that bed down this driveway on my hand truck, it'll kill me!* I called my two neighbors, George & Fred. One advantage of COVID lock down is that everyone is usually home. They were out on the road in seconds. The three men, walked backward down the driveway, with the weighty bed on a hydraulic hand truck, controlling it against gravity as they went, and got it to the front door. It was fifteen minutes of their day, but where would I have been without them? I could just cry thinking of their many kindnesses to us, these past months. They keep us in the loop, steady with their friendship. Our once-a-month dinner rotation is suspended, but weekly cocktails, together-but-apart on our patio, feels special and fun.

After the monstrous killer package was at my front door, I untied all the parts from the pallet. I wrestled the miles of shrink wrap and plastic bindings to submission. I lugged the heavy cardboard boxes into the house, I unbolted the chassis from the pallet. Later, Josh arrived with May Anne, his wife, and Aidan, their 16-year-old son, our grandson. Three of us hauled that painfully chassis into the house.

But oh, what a lovely evening, watching Josh and Aidan as they worked together assembling that bed. Sixteen-year-olds are made for popping up, fetching the hardware and squirming around and down on the floor to handle all the tight spots. It seems so recently, that I was that agile person. What a sweet father/son team they were. In fact, Josh was on the scene for other items, as well; the over bed table, walker, etc. Aidan handles the electronics. He set up the new router, paired the remotes, fixed computer problems; an unexpected talent from a lifelong Waldorfian.

How lucky are we? Family and neighbors are our village in these strange times. While I shift happily back to my old introverted, less busy, self, I also see something new. I was raised to do it. My mother just issued her lists of things to be done and I was expected to do them. No thanks were forthcoming and nothing was ever going to be remotely okay anyway, so Linda just does it all. Now I am in a different family. People pitch in, offer help, and always, always say thanks. It is one of my silver linings. Fred's kids are another. I cannot lay claim to them as my daughter or sons. But, calling them merely Fred's sons or Fred's daughter doesn't feel accurate either. They are certainly my somebodies, my family and so dear to me.

I am in touch with fellow writers and Zentangle buddies and friends near and far on ZOOM. Not to mention the socially distant gatherings on the patio. Somehow, we are busy, well fed and don't feel isolated. We are very fortunate.

At this writing Fred and I are sitting on the sofa as he reads this piece. He is warmed by my love for his kids and my happiness at taking care of him, of still having him. He has worked with several therapists these past few months and he is getting stronger. He is able to stand up from a chair or the bed without me and get around the house with his walker. He thanks me daily for all that I do for him and I thank him for this life of safety and comfort. I feel unbelievably spoiled.

### *OCTOBER POST SCRIPT*

Change is still coming fast. There have been more falls, and the aches and cuts they cause. Fred is mostly wheelchair bound these days. He sleeps a lot. I dread the day when Fred can no longer stand at all. We are in the process of finding a home care helper. I am exhausted alot, I sometimes don't feel at home in my own brain. Fred is becoming more frail so I still treasure this time I have with him. Our country's free fall continues as well.

*LINDA SONDHEIMER*



## *2020: FLASH MEMOIRS*

### *WIND-UP TOYS*

8 a.m. Monday, late July 2020. Another morning, cold and gray with fog. I turn on the gas fireplace in our living room to take the chill out of the air and make my one, perfect cup of Peet's coffee with half-and-half. Our dog Habibi nabs her purple bear and runs through the house squeaking it with joy because she's herded all her people into the living room: my wife Tanya, my mother-in-law Laura, and me.

Tanya exuberantly speeds around like a wind-up toy, squealing at the dog, riling her up.

I haven't even had my first sip of coffee.

"She's trying to perk us up," I say to Laura.

"I've *never* felt *that* good in my whole life," Laura says.

We're both laughing, hard, and so the day begins.

### *HERE WE GO AGAIN...*

Even though it's only late August, summer has slipped into early fall. Dahlia leaves are mildewed. Succulents pant. The redwood droops as it sheds small dried sprigs that gently float to the ground. During an unusual thunder and lightning storm a few nights ago, the wind blew so much redwood detritus onto our backyard cottage that our neighbor Carson got up on her rooftop and then ours to blow it all off with a leaf blower.

That wind and lightning storm set California on fire. All my favorite places burn: west Sonoma, near Ft. Ross, where my friend Paul reports that flames roaring up the hills can be seen from his cabin; in the river town of Guerneville, a different fire burns on the perimeter of Armstrong Woods' lofty, magnificent redwoods; outside Healdsburg, fire threatens homes, wineries, and fine restaurants; and fire rips through the Point Reyes National Seashore in West Marin, far too close for comfort to Inverness, one of my favorite spots in the world. Our neighbor Renate is hosting relatives who evacuated their burning vineyard in St. Helena in Napa Valley.

After avoiding this thought all day, my mind finally wonders how evacuation centers cope with fire refugees and social distancing. How do fire fighters socially distance? What kind of nightmare is this?

The air in Berkeley smells of smoke. Ash covers our deck and cars with a fine white powder. Occasionally, a big ash will float by, dancing like a flower petal on the breeze.

We're plagued with a heat wave. How do we close up our house to keep out the smoke in the midst of triple-digit heat? It feels like a sauna inside.

How do I tell my mind to quit dreaming up more bad things that can happen? Things I don't dare to write down just in case it gives them energy...

All this—covid, smoke, fire, lockdown, triple-digit heat—happens against the backdrop of the Democratic National Convention. Tonight, I'll listen to Joe Biden, hoping to feel soothed. Bannon gets indicted and I'm overjoyed. Trump is ordered by a judge to turn over his tax returns. I applaud. But still, underlying any happiness is fear that's always with me: fear about a nation run amok, about an insane president, about Republican enablers, about our environment, racism, suffering, evictions, and depression that is both emotional and economic. About the rage I feel that I need to pour out of me so it doesn't eat me alive.

I breathe deeply to calm myself, but the smoke makes me cough.

## *GRATITUDES*

About ten years ago, I started a practice of exchanging almost-daily emails with two friends: Maggie, whom I've known for almost fifty years, who now lives in Kenosha, Wisconsin; and Leann, a friend for close to thirty, who lives nearby. The emails emerged as an idea from a class I took called *Awakening Joy*, taught by Vipassana teacher James Baraz. It felt good to send out my list of gratitudes every night after reflecting on my day.

Sometimes all I could come up with was: Clean sheets.

Sometimes I'd write long paragraphs about moments in my day. Recently, I described the Cooper's hawk that lives in the woods behind our house. It's so majestic; its call so shrill. On the day I was writing, I'd glanced out our bedroom window and seen it swoop down to land on the fence just ten feet away from me. Only a few feet below it, our neighborhood squirrel was wandering along the fence-top highway that takes her to our green apple tree, where she picks apples and chomps on them until gravity takes over and the apples fall to the ground, half-eaten, at best.

I literally felt my heart in my throat, both amazed and horrified by what I might see if the hawk grabbed the squirrel. The squirrel seemed unaware of the hawk, so I ran down the stairs and out onto the porch to try to save it. They weren't there; both the squirrel and the hawk were gone. Oh, no!

Then I spied the hawk circling in the air by the redwood making its shrill I'm-hunting call. The squirrel was sheltered in the arms and foliage of our tree, nibbling an apple.

Sheltering in place has come with a mandate to express gratitude. On a particularly hard day, I was feeling sad and grumpy about the state of the world—and not at all grateful. But I had a Zoom meeting to attend and people to greet.

“How are you?” the moderator asked. No one answered “Fine” or “Hanging in” or “Okay, under the circumstances.” Instead, each person gave a long litany of all the things she was grateful for: a home, helpful neighbors, the privilege of having resources when so many are suffering.

I rebel against feeling I have to display good manners, *be nice*, show my gratitude. It’s not that I disagree with the beauty of this practice. It’s just that it feels fake to put on a smile as my heart breaks and my soul mourns.

### *HEADING INTO LABOR DAY WEEKEND*

I write an email to my good friends Pam and Steve, with whom I can be totally, whiningly honest, without recitations of any gratitude, a huge relief. We’re in the middle of an extraordinary heat wave, but all our windows are closed to protect us from smoke; the smoke outside is about to go from moderate to something worse; and we’re still sheltering from covid. Now friends and even my son Cooper can’t come for distanced visiting in the unbreathable air. Holy shit.

*“I looked up what we’d pay for a cabin in the Blue Ridge mountains for 2 months,”* I write Pam and Steve. Unfortunately, it was something around \$12,000 for a 3 bedroom/2 bath. Not exactly affordable! But now that we have Winter, Spring, Summer, Smoke Season, and Fall, I wonder if there’s a reasonable way to be smoke bunnies, like the snow bunnies who go to Arizona during the winter each year.

*“Sorry to be so pathetic!!! We are actually doing ok,”* I say. I tell them about Laura’s tiny portable AC that she needed where she used to live and that I’m actually grateful she’s not sheltering there now, where the temperature would likely be north of 100 degrees on heat wave days. Tanya has hooked up the AC in the middle of our living room and we have one room that is okay. Not really cool, but not hot either.

*“I write a little. Read some. Look at my devices a lot. I’ve lost 27 pounds on JumpStartMD (low carb, protein, veggies, a little fruit, no sugar, no processed anything). It feels great. 12 pounds to go, but I lost my chi a few weeks ago, so I’m hanging out at 27 pounds until it (the chi) reappears.”*

*“I alternate between total apathy and rage at Trump and the spineless Republicans that we’re in this condition. I don’t have the energy to be mad long. It’s not good for me, anyway!”*

*“What a time, what a time. I want Trump GONE. And I want NO SMOKE!!”*

Shortly after I send this email, Pam sends back a love letter and makes me happy. “*Oh, Sweetie,*” she writes. Just the salutation makes my eyes teary. She’s into discussing diets. “*Well, it’s 10:46 on a Sunday morning. I have done my NYT magazine crossword puzzle. I have cut some flowers. The days can be so long!*”

A few days later, one of the Oregon fires puts them on alert: “Be prepared to evacuate.” It lasts for three or four days before they get the all clear.

### *BRIEF REPRIEVE*

It’s come to this: I can’t tell if I’m depressed, tired, bored, or just mellow. Smoky day after smoky day. Windows closed.

Very occasionally, the air clears. The sun comes out, the sky turns blue, I can almost forget what we’re going through. In those clear-air moments, neighbors emerge to breathe fresh air, garden, and exercise. Kids ride by on bikes. People take walks, masks in their hands rather than on their faces.

On our deck, I watch birds in the birdbath, fluttering, chirping, splashing, shaking off. I gaze up at the redwood, looking for the Cooper’s hawk. The children who live in the house over the back fence jump on their trampoline, play basketball, climb the magnolia and shelter in its arms.

Within a few short hours, the fog rolls in along with the smoke...the reprieve is over. It’s gray again.

### *ENOUGH, ALREADY*

On September 8<sup>th</sup>, seven months after my household started hibernating, the day for my “vacation” arrives. I’d made a reservation a month earlier, when I was crawling out of my skin from being home so long, Zooming, masking everywhere I went. I’d been talking about taking a little trip, but I had to accept that Tanya just isn’t comfortable leaving home right now. The effort of finding someone to help with her mother, dealing with the dog, taking all our own food, and being away made her nervous. Finally, I told her that I needed to be *away* as badly as she needed to *stay*. And I made a reservation at a small cabin in Albion, right where the Albion River pours into the Pacific.

I planned ahead very carefully so I’d be safe. I’d bring all my own food. I wouldn’t eat out. I’d bring Clorox wipes. And I’d pee in the woods on the way up to avoid using a public toilet.

I made a list of what to bring, to keep myself organized, since there were so many additional things to think about with this trip during covid.

The 8<sup>th</sup> is weird in Berkeley. Very dark, gloomy. But cooler, following several days of heat wave. I check AirNow and find the air quality is almost in the green zone, and we throw open every window to air out our house in the coolness of early morning.

I check the CalFire map to see if there are any new fires in Mendocino County. A few days ago, the only fire was in the east part of county far from the coast. But over the weekend, a new fire started much closer to the coast and it's still zero percent contained. MapQuest shows the distance from the fire to Albion at 45 miles. I figure I'm safe when I see that the air quality in Albion is well within the green zone and decide to go.

I pack, kiss Laura and Tanya goodbye, pat Habibi, and off I go with trepidation, excitement, and determination to see this through.

I expect to cross the Richmond-San Rafael bridge and find blue skies as always when it's foggy and gray in Berkeley. But haze blankets everything. Mt. Tam is invisible behind smoke. Unlike my usual trips north, I don't stop for coffee at The Flying Goat in Healdsburg: I drive straight through, finding not a single patch of blue sky anywhere. Just heavy smoke. A world muted, subdued, shrouded.

Approaching Cloverdale, I notice that all the cars driving south have their lights on, even though it's only 2:00 p.m.! I figure, why not? My car is gray like the smoke. On go my lights, too.

When I turn off Highway 101 to drive west to the coast, it's almost dark. Like dusk, dark. And the sky is surreal, becoming an ominous deep purple as if there's a hurricane coming. At other times, it's a deep, angry pink. Am I driving straight into another fire? I try to quell my panic by telling myself that the highway would be closed if there were fire ahead.

For thirty miles, I drive along winding mountain roads in the dark, the sky ever-foreboding. Each car has its lights on, though it's only mid-afternoon. I consider turning around to go home because it feels like an inferno. I fill with grief for the world, for a burning California. Tears stream down my face. I drive on, over roads I drove hundreds of times when I lived in Mendocino County in the 1960s and 1970s, full of memories about life then, about how much simpler it seemed.

The redwood forests along the two-lane highway to the coast are so dark, it's like night. And still, the eerie sky peeks through when there are breaks in the trees. Finally, driving beside the Navarro River three miles from the coast, I emerge into the light and the coastal highway. A left-turn will take me south to Elk. A right-turn will take me to Albion. I turn right, cross the bridge over the Albion River, and here is my spot. I've driven through hell to get to heaven.



Moving in takes an hour—hang clothes, put away food, set up bathroom, unpack books. Pour a glass of wine, go out on the deck, sit in the Adirondack chair, unwind. The air quality is still in the green zone.

I'm so tense from the months of hibernation and the Apocalyptic Drive that I don't even hear the surf for a while, even though I'm right at the mouth of the river on the Pacific Ocean. Directly in front of me, across the river, is a long, rolling hill, the top covered by our ubiquitous yellow summer grasses, with a cow or two silhouetted against the sky. Waves crash onto the rocks below me. Sea birds float on the air currents, looking for fish. Two hummingbirds flit by so fast that I can barely see them, oblivious, it seems, to our crumbling, wounded world. The air smells of seaweed, salt, and the rich, earthy smell that wafts up from below. With relief, I breathe deeply, relishing clean air.

I sit with floating mind for several hours, watching the sky, the surf, the line between the top of the hills and the sky, rising only to put on my heavy sweater. Ever-so-slowly, my body begins to relax. I leave again for less than five minutes to get food and when I return, mist rises from the warm river water as it meets the cooling air and the cooler ocean. One last fishing boat slowly returns from sea, its lights blinking.

When it's almost dark, I come inside, open the window by my bed, and sleep all night, under blankets, listening to the surf roll in, feeling the wind off the ocean, taking deep breaths of clean sea air.

### *LAMENTATION*

An email from my friend Leann tells me that there's a fire in Ashland, Oregon. Two days later, I learn that New Sammy's Cowboy Bistro in Talent, Oregon, burned to the ground.

When Tanya and I drove past it the first time, maybe fifteen years ago, on the way from Ashland, where we were vacationing, to tourist in Jacksonville, we were captivated by its neon sign flashing on a tall pole. With a name like New Sammy's Cowboy Bistro, how could we *not* check it out? And how about those flashing cowboy boots? We didn't know then that New Sammy's had a devout worldwide following.

The restaurant was magical: almost indescribably beautiful, serene. In fact, there was nothing cowboy about it. It felt like entering a temple. Every square inch was lovingly composed by husband-and-wife owners, Charlene and Vernon Rollins. The restaurant glowed: hammered copper tables glimmered in the subdued light, each bearing a small ceramic vase holding a few cut flowers from the abundant gardens; luminous copper/golden/purple curtains shimmered on doorways and between rooms; simple but elegant art adorned the hand-plastered walls. Charlene meticulously prepared veggies from the restaurant's lush organic gardens and organic

meat from farmers she knew personally. Vernon selected the wine, because why would you do it yourself when he would do it for you and choose something unexpected and delicious?

Being in New Sammy's was a holy experience.  
And now, it's gone.

And here I am, mourning a restaurant.

Of course, I'm aware that I'm throwing all my mourning energy into New Sammy's when I have many harder things to mourn: my mother's death in January, our crumbling democracy, a nation revealing the depths of its racism, the potential loss of our right to abortion, the vanishing of the routine of my daily life, the pervasive suffering in the world, the degradation of our environment.

Still, I am crushed about New Sammy's.

Which takes my mind to so many special places that were lovingly created that are gone now, from fire, from the pandemic. Every time I venture into the world, which is not often, I see another business closed, its windows covered in brown paper: small art galleries, makeup stores, little niche clothing stores, neighborhood restaurants, mom-and-pop businesses on small streets all across town.

I worry. When this is over, will only Amazon, Walmart, and Target remain? Will people be able to muster the strength, the money, the energy to build new small businesses that will provide the variety and gathering points for our neighborhoods? Will we ever flourish again?

*[This excerpt follows flash memoirs that start in 2020 with my mother's cremation.]*

*MARTINA REAVES*





*Thunderstruck*<sup>1</sup>

## *COVID TIME*

She was sitting on the couch in the early darkness, reading the paper and drinking iced tea, a washcloth dipped in ice water hung around her neck. Both fans were running at top speed. The air filter was set to turbo power. It was 88 degrees indoors. The house was closed up tight due to the smoke. Having fasted from the news for days, she now dipped back in with a kind of horrified fascination.

Boom! Crack-Boom! Someone had begun to set off fireworks. Half the state was already on fire.

She jerked up and went to the front door and stood on the porch, screeched “Are you crazy? Stop that!” She paused, then shouted again, “Stop it!” Saw herself, hair wild wires had loosened from the combs she now used to tame it, haircuts 6 months in the past, feet bare, in only underpants and a tank top, in the dark. Abruptly, she saw herself, crazy harridan—*How did I get here?*

It was September.

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<sup>1</sup> Photo by Adam Pardee via Reddit, August 16, 2020.

## *FEBRUARY 25*

My friend Bob picks me up around 10 on the splendid morning of my birthday. We drive across the Richmond Bridge where we can see Mt. Tamalpais clearly, promising fine weather further west.

Now, you need a reservation to go to Muir Woods. It is too popular. Like Joni Mitchell predicted:

“Take all the trees, put ‘em in a tree museum  
Charge the people a dollar and a half just to see ‘em.”

The Redwoods. A sacred feeling to be among them. The fresh, sharp scent revives my senses. The sun angles in the late morning, revealing the deeper view into the wood, and the twists and turns in the bark, sculpted in centuries. We take our time. Study ancient rings in the enormous slice of wood.

When Bob takes a break by a bridge, enjoying a toddler’s exploration, I pick up my pace along the path for solitude, reveling in motion, in the ambience, touching a fern, admiring a tiny flower, hearing the creek on its way to the sea.

I turn back to join Bob, but here he is. A woman comes along in hiking gear that placed her somewhere between an early 20<sup>th</sup> century explorer and a Ralph Lauren ad. Newly enchanted, she extols the redwoods’ “healing properties” to us.

Bob and I cross over the water together and slowly make our way back toward the entrance. We pause to take photos of each other standing in the burned-out hollow of a huge trunk of a tree that stretches beyond our view.

Leaving, we are peaceful. He recalls the way to Sausalito and everything we pass is pastoral, lovely—tan fields, oaks, and the grand sloping hills.

Bob slides into valet parking of a restaurant in Sausalito he remembered from the old days. We are shown to a table close to the water. We relax while they fix our crab feast. Bob exults, “I’m kicking ass!” like a young man on a date. I laugh.

Sailboats glide on the bay, a huge container ship churns forward bringing stacks of stuff from China. I wonder if the virus could come in on these goods—how long does it live, and where? How will they know? How will they test?

A splendid yacht comes slowly by, a kind of dream boat. The crab is delicious. We eat our fill. I feel a deep melancholy beneath the perfection of the day, as if I’m living the last, best day on earth as we have known it. And that it’s alright to enjoy it thoroughly, despite the sense of an elegy.

## MARCH

Sheltering in place is ordered for our six Bay Area counties. I feel relief in the Order to stay home. There is certainty in that. And the comfort of leadership being proactive. For once, exempted from the requirement to be active—going here and there, checking WAZE for timing the traffic, keeping up with the groups, the meetings, the meals, the doctors, the exhibitions, the plays, the movies.

The perfect time to read *War and Peace*. If not now, when? A big book, big themes, human folly, suffering and romance among unique and fascinating characters in a recent translation beautifully rendered.

In the garden, Spring is happening. There is peace. I feel connection with the earth. Here, time slows, and I am so still when the bird comes regularly to bathe and makes a kind of plopping, gulping sound in the pond. I feed the flowers. Reading here in the afternoon when the sun hits my shoulder, I reflect that this is more like what I thought retirement would be. Could be still? I'm off the hook.

Orange tulips I brought from Amsterdam surprise me. Tired after pruning, staking and watering, I sit down on the chaise, let myself fall back and see the sky, as one does as a child, completely lost in it.

There are too many bodies to bury. In Spain, in New York, they are stashing bodies in ice rinks, in refrigerated trucks—it's a charnel house. In *War and Peace*, in an absurd battle, the bodies pile up in the Napoleonic war in Russia. Prince Andrei, with whom I have fallen in love, lies wounded:

“Over him again was that same lofty sky, with floating clouds  
Rising still higher, through which showed the blue of infinity.”

## EASTER MORNING, APRIL 12

In my bed, I open my laptop for journaling, and instead visit the Andrea Bocelli concert that is being streamed around the world today.

First the silence. Then the birds chirping. Quiet in the great city shut down. Then, the lone singer and one organist in the enormous Duomo di Milano, slowly revealed with details of the architecture in close-up as the hymn soars . . . To close, he stands alone before the magnificent Cathedral and sings “Amazing Grace.” Occasionally, a shot of another great city, vacant: Berlin . . . one car passes the Brandenburg gate . . . Paris . . . a tiny walker in a bright coat . . . London, and the finale, New York. The camera tracks legato, the metropolis holy in its emptiness. Grief arises and I just cry and cry. The enormity of the suffering, just on the other side of my walls, down the road in hospitals, all the loss of these weeks and months

around the world, and more to come . . . It hasn't begun in the southern hemisphere yet.

## MAY

The solitude is leavened with phone calls, Zoom meetings, the technology sometimes infuriating but a blessing all the same. Zach has asked me not to go out to the store and brings me groceries now. We are careful. Keeping distance. Not hugging. I wash my groceries, dropping the grapefruit, lemons, apples, bananas in a sink of soapy water, bell peppers, too. Scrubbing. We have a Zoom dinner.

A Roger Cohen column reminds me of the song, "Who Knows Where the Time Goes?" and I listen to the exquisitely tender Judy Collins rendition.

"Across the morning sky, all the birds are leaving . . ."

I call "Alexa, again!" until it plays in a loop, and I sing too, sing through Covid time.

It was when I had been protecting myself from so much horrible news, I heard something awful in a meeting. A young black woman was overcome, traumatized? What had happened? Cops in Minneapolis? Another black man murdered? Then I saw—what? What *is* that? My mind could not make sense of the picture on the screen, like a puzzle, it suddenly took shape and I *saw*. Tears sprung to my eyes. I gasped. Oh my god.

And then the popular outrage poured forth, out onto the streets, homemade signs "I Can't Breathe," "Black Lives Matter" supported by many this time, pent-up and paying attention. Me and my cohort, too old to mix in a crowd in Covid time, but we began a new consciousness-raising.

I knew, of course. I knew. I had complained since college—why did they have to *kill* him? And yet, I didn't *know*. Now there is much work to be done. How to deepen my apprehension and how to support the movement? "What will you *do*?" they ask this time. Enough with the liberal guilt and the intellectual understanding. "What will you *do*?" When I think of throwing caution to the wind, I see the old man knocked down on the sidewalk by the cops and left.

On the evening news, I take heart from footage of throngs in the streets, leaving themselves exposed to more violence. And more. And more. But this time, a sheriff takes a knee. In this strange time, we get it. We are home. We are unemployed. We bear witness. We are stuck with it. We must own it.

And these leaders—they are ready. They have thought for a long time. They have ideas, plans, concepts. They are women and they are humbling and inspiring to me, feeling oh so white.

## *AUGUST*

An enormous crack of thunder shakes me awake at 5 a.m. I wait, where is the lightning? Finally, it comes. Andy wrote amusingly from London yesterday of “Il pleut cordes.” Is this that weather? It doesn’t rain at first and I hurry out to bring in the big chaise cushions already damp. Needles from the neighbor’s tree have outdone the ones just cleaned up. I sigh. I stick my metal bird back in the dirt firmly from where he had been left leaning against the house. The wind is coming up.

I see a bizarre lightning spectacle out the window—flash, a circular unnatural looking thing. As I lie down, I hear sirens. Trouble. Fire follows. Heat rises to triple digits. Then the smoke. The smoke was bad a few years ago for a few days. The heat is bad every year for 3-5 days, but cools at night when the fog rolls in. Not now. We have managed to ruin our climate. Masks to go outdoors when no one is around. Homes closed up. Anna emails it is 99 inside her house. It is 88 inside mine and I am enervated, thinking *this is how those old people died in Paris that August a few years back*.

Our air quality worsts Mumbai. I upload an Air Quality app. And check it compulsively. Purple air. We can’t breathe.

## *SEPTEMBER*

Oregon burning? Oregon, where it rains and rains. The fires are rushing through the towns like Talent, next to Ashland. I shudder at the black and white and grey devastated remains of a house and recall the happy morning when we gathered at the sweet home of an actor, a cozy place with wonderful windows and an open floor plan perfect for our Pesto Project. Each year, the actor grows bushels of basil in his expansive garden and invites the company to help make pesto, and did we ever make pesto. Blenders arrived, jars with lids, scrubbed and ready. This pesto brings a pretty penny at the annual Oregon Shakespeare Festival fundraiser for AIDs. Then, we all put on a razzle-dazzle show that sells out, for AIDs research.

That’s all shut down now. Near there, the evacuees are afraid to go inside the shelters.

So many people need help in so many ways, it is overwhelming.



Awaken feeling dizzy, lightly poisoned. Put on the N95 mask in bed to rest awhile longer. Toasted roses out my bedroom window. Pass the day in my cave. Watch TV until midnight for distraction, waiting to open and cool the house.

Another day and at first, I'm confused . . . isn't it morning? I slept in but something is weird. I go to the drape, peek out, it is dark. The sky is orange! I turn on the TV and people are driving to work with their lights on. The temperature has dropped. Disoriented in the dark, we dwell in a strange aquarium below the marine layer that glows orange all day. "Hell is murky," a refrain from Macbeth, repeats in my head.

That afternoon, I have an appointment with an air conditioning company for an estimate. I seem sane throughout, focused on solutions. After, I feel sick and go back to bed. The future in our face. Why plan when it's the end of days?

And so, it came to pass that I was reading the *Times* front page coverage of our fires when I heard a loud boom.

. . . back to the beginning . . .

*KAREN GRASSLE*

## *REVERIES & RESILIENCE IN THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC AND INFESTATION*

My sister was completing her tour of the Far East on Holland America's cruise ship, the *MS Westerdam*, when ten passengers on another cruise ship, the *Diamond Princess*, tested positive for the coronavirus on February 4, 2020. After passengers and crew were tested, at least 712 of the 3,711 had been infected.

Then, text messages from my sister abruptly ceased. My nephew and I frantically searched the internet for news. Finally, a newspaper reported that her ship had been condemned to sail from country to country, seeking safe harbor but refused by all until Cambodia allowed it to anchor at Sihanoukville. Throughout the not-knowing, a long-forgotten disquieting memory haunted me, of how a ship laden with 900 Jews fleeing Nazi Germany had been denied entry at multiple ports, including the U.S., in 1939.

American authorities took no precautionary measures, allowing my sister and other passengers to return and enter the U.S. without restrictions. Later, it was learned, that a woman who had been on their ship, while trying to catch a connecting flight in Malaysia, tested positive for the virus. My sister self-isolated and was fine. But it was obvious to me in early February that the virus had embedded itself on our soil.

March 16, 2020. *San Francisco Chronicle*. Six Bay Area counties announced on Monday "shelter in place" orders for all residents—the strictest measure of its kind yet in the continental United States—directing everyone to stay inside their homes and away from others as much as possible . . .

Life in the Bay Area changed that day. I continue to work as a Marriage & Family Therapist via "telehealth," a word coined by insurance companies who refer clients to me. I, like the rest of the workforce privileged enough to be able to work from home, find myself "Zooming." A lot. Sometimes all day. What's particularly bothersome about Zoom for a psychotherapist like me, is that sometimes people's words are not in sync with their facial expressions.

March 27, 2020. The CDC reports confirmed cases of the coronavirus pass 100,000.

By early April I notice them—tiny flies, like flying dust particles—in my apartment. They fly into my nose and don't come out! I am both horrified and scared. *Flies carry diseases*. Working on Zoom is sheer torture. Unfortunately, like what its name implies, Zoom zooms in for close-ups of our faces. Whenever a fly careens up my nose, I fight to maintain my professional psychotherapist decorum: I don't alter a facial muscle while concentrating on every word my client is saying. But internally I want to scream, gouge or blast the fly, or flies, out of my nose until the tickling and itching stop. Once, though, I almost lost my cool. A fly landed within killing distance. I picked up my notepad. Whack! Missed! My client didn't notice, didn't miss a beat.

Desperate, I seek help from management of my apartment complex. It sends two maintenance men who swear that the insect is the fruit fly. "No," I tell them, "they are not. I studied fruit flies under a microscope when I was a college student." The maintenance men, perhaps not knowing what else to do, aerosol-spray my apartment for fruit flies.

April 24, 2020. *BBC*. U.S. President Donald Trump has been lambasted by the medical community after suggesting research into whether coronavirus might be treated by injecting disinfectant into the body. . . .[and] irradiating patients' bodies with UV light . . .

The days turn into weeks and the number of insects continue to multiply inside my apartment. I continue to pester the apartment's management for help. They tell me that an exterminator is "on the premises only every other week on Thursdays." Expecting to see an exterminator on Thursday, I am perplexed why someone didn't come. Management answers: "Oh, he came yesterday."

"But you told me that he comes on Thursdays!"

"I'm sorry, we don't always know when he comes." It takes a whole month for the administrative office to learn that the exterminator comes every Wednesday every week, when needed.

Sometimes, while falling asleep, I am suddenly startled awake. My heart pounds rapidly while an icy cold fear creeps through my body. An explosive sneeze validates that flies have invaded my nose. I grab a tissue and blow. Then shielding my face with a pandemic paper mask, I try to fall asleep.

From childhood on, I would often vanquish my fears by conjuring up my favorite memories—memories that elicit powerful body sensations of warmth and relief. Then, as a psychotherapist, while learning techniques of treating trauma, I discover that what my trauma instructors are trying to teach me is what I already naturally do.

There is something remarkable about my pleasant memories. They often arise on their own, around the same time of year as when something extraordinarily pleasurable was actually happening in my life. And this year, when the flies are haunting me in April, my reveries take me to North Africa.

*It was in early Spring 1973 that I accepted a six-month job as a tour guide with Thomson Holidays to finance my studies at the University of London. They send me to the Jawhara Hotel in Sousse, Tunisia. As I step out of the car, a cloak of an intoxicating perfume wafted out from the hotel's gardens. It wrapped itself around me and instantly dissipated my travel fatigue. The intoxicating fragrance of jasmine blossoms was an aphrodisiac, heightening a sensory awareness never before felt. My journey of the sensual and sensuous, never to be repeated elsewhere nor at any other time, began that moment.*

*I met Henrik that first night at dinner. The appetizer placed in front of me looked like an apple turnover dressed in a flaky pastry. As I lifted it with my fingers to taste it, I noticed the other tour guides were watching. "Must be because I'm not white," flashed through my head. Then I bit into it. Liquid egg yolk immediately dribbled down my chin. The others burst into laughter. Henrik, to my left, was ready. He dipped his cloth napkin into a glass of water, turned my face toward him and gently wiped away the stickiness. His eyes met mine. And I knew instinctively that this blond, blue-eyed stranger and I would become lovers.*

*He was at the Jawhara for only a month before he was assigned to another town. Whenever he came to me or I went to him, we would rent a car and travel to new parts of Tunisia. It was on one of these excursions that we camped in the pre-Sahara Desert. A million stars surrounded us in the deep dark, beckoning us to sleep in the open. As we lay in companionable silence, overcome by the majesty, breadth, depth and beauty of the sky, heaven seemed to say "You forgot me. Welcome back." It was a glorious reminder of being part of something much bigger.*

July 1, 2020. *NBC News*. President Donald Trump said Wednesday that he believes the coronavirus will "just disappear" even as cases explode across the U.S. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases said "I would not be surprised if we go up to 100,000 a day if this does not turn around. Clearly we are not in total control."

Week 12 of my infestation. My reveries do not chase away the flies. Not until late-June does an exterminator finally show up at my apartment. I am happy to see him. Friendly, polite, portly, the first comment he makes after examining the flies on sticky

fly paper with my 3x magnifier (he did not have his own) surprises me: “I don’t know what they are. I’ve never seen these before!” Then, excitedly, he exclaims: “They’re humpbacked!”

He gives me two small round bright orange perforated plastic containers filled with red wine vinegar and soap to trap fungus gnats. I am dumbfounded. “Why use these if they’re not fungus gnats!?” I ask. He replies, “Because fungus gnats are also slightly humpbacked.”

I am not an entomologist so I would not have thought anything of the insect’s humpback. But the exterminator’s reaction made me google “humpback insect.” What pops up immediately is “Phorid Fly, nicknamed the ‘humpback fly, the scuttle fly, and the coffin fly.’” The photo shows an enlargement of an insect that is exactly the same as the ones on my fly papers. The same exterminator returns two weeks after his first visit, in mid-July. When I tell him about the phorid, he again sprays my apartment for the fungus gnat.

Week 16 of my infestation: At the end of July, I desperately search for professional help. I call the Alameda County Health Department. They send out a vector control officer the same day. I assume that he’s going to investigate where the insect is breeding, because according to information on the internet, it’s the only way to eliminate the phorids from my apartment. He doesn’t. He does, however, send a sticky board with dead flies to his lab. Just before leaving, the inspector proclaims with confidence, assuring me that *“the fly will soon disappear.”* Later the lab confirms that the fly is the phorid.

I still need a pest control company that will treat the phorid and decide to pay for it myself if I can find the right expert. I do. He confirms the identity of the insect at my apartment and speculates that it could be breeding behind the dishwasher. However, to move the built-in dishwasher would require management to authorize a maintenance man or team. Before departing, my would-be exterminator also declares that *“the flies will eventually disappear.”*

Uh-oh. I have a premonition that things will go badly. They do. According to management, I cannot hire my own pest control company because they have a policy that “allows only their own contracted pest control company to treat insects.”

A female phorid lays 40 eggs every 12 hours. “No, no,” I stop myself, “don’t do the math,” Instead, my resilience kicks in and transports me to July 1975, to Bombay (now Mumbai), India where I witnessed a successful and satisfying way of getting rid of insects.

*My travel companion, David, was my classmate from the School of Oriental and African Studies. His sister, married to an Indian doctor from a well-to-do family, had invited him to visit her. When he invited me to go along, I knew there would be no romantic entanglement because he was gay. David had met his sister's in-laws in London and didn't want to stay with them in India. "Rowdy," he said anxiously. So we checked into a hotel that his Indian family disapprovingly nicknamed the "hippies' hotel." We were invited to dinner every night at their Victorian mansion where David's sister's mother-in-law presided. The mother-in-law was a practicing Jain, which emphasizes non-violence, and thus no killing, not even insects. Every night when David's sister and her mother-in-law disappeared into the kitchen to supervise the staff, everyone at the table instantly stood, grabbed their serviette and began swatting every insect they could see in every part of the room. A lookout was always appointed, and because I was "inexpert" at killing insects, I soon became the official sentry, each time stifling my mirth at the scene before me.*

Back to reality: Phorids, when born, measure only 0.5 mm. Miniscule. The men who come to treat the insect expect to see house flies. They look up at my 14-foot ceiling and see nothing. Because of COVID-19 they wear masks when they enter my apartment. Nose masked, they don't experience what I do—phorids zinging up *their* noses. Phorids have a peculiar way of flying. Zig-zagging 2,200 kilometers per second, like a drunk erratic electron, their aim is nevertheless uncanny and deadly. Often, I don't feel their entry into my nose until my nose detonates in itching and runs.

August 13, 2020. Mayo Clinic. Research increasingly shows that racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately affected by coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in the United States.

Would I suffer as much from the phorids if I had nasal hair? But I don't. They fly in and head straight into my sinus cavity where they . . . No, I can't go there. My right brain, instead, carries me away—to memories of a beloved log cabin in a Maryland suburb fifteen miles from Washington, DC.

*Hewn on the ceiling's central log near the gray stone fireplace is a date: 1796. Our landlord had enlarged and modernized the cabin. He also had the interior logs polished until they radiated a luxurious warmth. The overall effect regularly drew our friends to our cabin where they treated it like their weekend home. My husband Patrick and I were enchanted by the animal life that surrounded us. Like the Beatrix Potter bunnies with translucent golden ears that appeared every Easter. They hid*

*under our wooden staircase by the front door so that whenever we stepped outside, they'd scamper away with their white cottontails flashing in the sunlight. Their beautiful cottontail was exactly what made them vulnerable to predators. Whenever I heard owls hooting in the night my heart froze, and I worried which of the bunnies would be gone by morning.*

August 21, 2020. *BBC*. The US has now surpassed six million cases of COVID-19, almost a quarter of the world's total, according to data collated by Johns Hopkins University.

Week sixteen of my infestation: The apathy of the apartment complex management persists. In desperation I write a letter on August 3 to the owner of the apartment complex. Although the letter was addressed "To Whom It May Concern," the envelope itself was addressed to the CEO & President.

Two weeks later, an area manager, Sarah (not her real name), contacts me by phone. She listens! She is as efficient and competent as the administrative staff of my apartment complex is slow and inexperienced. Within two days, she brings in a second pest control company, also under contract to the company. I ask for, and am granted, permission to move into another apartment if fumigation is ineffective. Sarah is my heroine.

But her help comes too late: the infestation is out of control. Every website I consult states that the number one priority in eliminating phorids is to determine *where the insects are breeding*. Neither one of the two pest control companies had done this. I have no choice but to move to another apartment in a different building in the same complex. And I do.

September 15/16, 2020. *USA Today*. President Donald Trump claimed . . . that "herd mentality" could make the coronavirus "disappear" with or without a vaccine. The President erroneously used the term, "herd mentality" for something called "herd immunity". . . the theory that the virus is eradicated only after 60-80% of the population is infected, limiting its ability to spread.

I move, but before doing so I ask for a final fumigation of my current apartment to assuage my fear that the insect could follow me into my new apartment. This would be the third time that my apartment is fogged. I complain to Sarah that I wake up dizzy from the insecticide. "Could I sleep overnight in my new apartment?" Permission granted. That night, in my new apartment, horror of horrors, an insect (or were there two?) flies into my nose.

My mind buzzes. Did the phorids hide in the things I brought with me to spend the night? And then there's the nightmarish question that haunts me still: Am I carrying the flies inside of me? Is this the reason why there are phorids in my new apartment?

In September, Week 20 of the phorids, a concerned childhood friend counsels me to call the Entomology Department at UC Davis. I do. I speak with Steve (nom de guerre), the forensic entomologist who is jovial and warmly reassuring, telling me about his own adventures with phorids. My conversation with Steve helps me recall something I read on the web., namely that phorids breed in quite unusual places. Like in shoe polish. "OMG," I say out loud, "I have butcher's wax under the kitchen sink!" I rush to google "what's in shoe polish," and ". . . in butcher's wax." Goose bumps pinch my skin when the answer pops up—"carnauba oil." A few seconds later I find the tin of wax. Stuck to its exterior is a perfect shoe-horn shaped larva just the way Steve had told me it would look. Scattered all around its rim were larva fragments. Having been traumatized by the insect for months, I waste not a second in throwing it out, killing the larva and fragments with alcohol first, then sealing the tin in a plastic bag and dumping it in the trash chute to be incinerated.

The number of flies seem to be decreasing. I don't know yet if they will "*simply disappear.*" But a reverie returns me to the log cabin in suburban Maryland.

*I frowned when a grackle flew in and muscled an innocent mourning dove from our birdbath. Grackles, I knew, eat other birds' eggs and kill their fledglings. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a mockingbird swooped in, pecking fiercely at the larger grackle and quickly vanquished it. "Wow! A middleweight took on a heavyweight and won!"*

Wouldn't it be nice if a human mockingbird with passion to protect the innocent were in the White House. This human fighter would inspire and teach citizens how to safeguard their own and other people's lives. Management in my apartment complex might even be influenced enough to learn what it takes to keep safe the lives of its tenants.

*ELEANOR LEW*





## *NEXT YEAR IN PERSON*

*“Life does not accommodate you, it shatters you. It is meant to, and couldn’t do it better. Every seed destroys its container or there would be no fruition.”*

—Florida Scott-Maxwell

Whether or not we catch it, Covid-19 has upended the lives we knew. My own life is a microcosm of adaptation, from minor to major, from mundane to existential.

### *DOMESTICATED AND BACKGROUNDED*

My comfortable house in the Oakland Hills is my shelter from the 2020 pandemic. I leave only once daily for a cautious walk.

I’ve grown used to living this way. More than marriage, motherhood, or retirement ever could, Covid-19 has domesticated me.

Pre-pandemic, my husband George and I foregrounded each weekend by planning a special event. A monthly highlight was an outing to San Francisco for the theater or opera and dinner. When we weren’t entertaining or being entertained, we explored the Bay Area for hiking and dining adventures, or we took off for a long weekend in Inverness, Calistoga, or Mendocino, among our favorites.

Covid-19 backgrounded our weekends, making them just like weekdays. If it weren’t for our observance of our Jewish Sabbath with Friday night’s candle-lighting, blessings, special meal, and self-imposed news blackout followed by Saturday morning’s virtual services with our synagogue community, weekends would come and go unnoticed.

Along with weekends, in-person reality has faded into the background. Three-dimensional physical presence has faded into a fond memory with everyone but George.

As meeting virtually has become the status quo, I cling to my embodied connections to family and friends—to those once taken-for-granted simple pleasures like hugs, eye contact, and body language. Convenient as virtual meetings are for now, I limit them to one a day, treating them as an aberration, not a new way of life. My mantra is, “Next year in person.”

### *RE-OFFICED AND DE-AUTOED*

Since George and I retired from our respective professions fifteen years ago, we seamlessly continued our pre-retirement routines of spending most of our weekdays apart and most of our weekends together.

On weekday early mornings we were together in our shared office, working on our individual projects, reviewing dilemmas and family matters, making plans and discussing the news before going our separate ways for the rest of the day.

We usually met at home in the late afternoon and shared our day's adventures while preparing delectable dinners to savor together.

Prioritizing quality morning and evening time worked well for us until Covid-19 arrived and suddenly we were together 24/7. Our shared office seemed to shrink. We quibbled non-stop.

"Must you listen to music all the time?"

"I can't quite follow you. What do you mean?"

"Please let's be quiet for a while. I can't concentrate."

Instead of prioritizing time together, as we had ever since we met, we now had to prioritize time apart.

Someone had to relocate. I claimed the room that had gone through many transformations to serve our children and grandchildren, turning it into my most spacious office ever. Now we spend our mornings apart and enjoy afternoon and evening quality time together. We rarely quibble anymore.

George and I have been a two-car couple for fifty-seven years. By 2020, we had a 2016 Toyota Camry and a 2004 Nissan Quest mini-van, the latter left over from our very active grandparenting days. We called the mini-van our Grand-mobile. For at least a dozen years, we gloried in venturing with our four close-in-age grandchildren all over the Bay Area in it, as well as loading it up for camping trips. As each grandchild became young adult with a driver's license and a car, Grand-mobile stayed on as our oversized second car.

During Covid-19, we have only two needs for car transportation—ten-minute jaunts to and from the redwoods, and George's solo shopping ventures. After months of sitting idle, Grand-mobile needed a new battery, and the air-conditioning, heater, and electrical wiring all needed repair as well.

"The labor and parts will cost more than the car is worth."

"Why are we insuring a car we never use?"

"Grand-mobile has earned its retirement!"

We donated it. Problem solved. We are now a single-car couple.

So it is that Covid-19 pushed us from one office to two, and from two cars to one.

### *ATROPHIED AND TIME-WARPED*

Staying fit during Covid-19 is a huge challenge, especially when heatwaves and smoke from the California wildfires starting in August forced us to skip our walks for days at a time. We opted for morning virtual Silver Sneakers exercise classes, made classes up on our own, or just danced around the house toting a small Bluetooth speaker blasting Beatles, Chicks, or other such music, until we fell down—exhausted.

After months without strength-training at the gym, we notice with alarm that triceps, quadriceps and other once somewhat visible muscle groups are vanishing altogether. This can be disastrous for old folks like George and me! We wonder, “Is it sarcopenia? Is it permanent?” Not knowing when the gyms will reopen in Alameda County or when we’d feel safe enough to go, we opt for a new low-tech stationary bike smack in front of the TV and spread free weights around the house. Atrophy begone!

When my pocket-size weekly calendar book loses the rubber band which would have opened it to the end of August, I mindlessly open it to the week of March eighth. I puzzle over why I reverted to March and conclude that, on some unconscious level, I must think it’s still March. On this level of my experience, I’m in a time-warp, and when real time picks up again it’ll be from where it left off . . . from March eighth, the day I began sheltering in place.

### *BUBBLED AND UN-BUBBLED*

We are surrounded by concentric layers of disasters; global and national as well as those specific to California, the County of Alameda and, finally, to the City of Oakland. Yet I imagine that George and I are protected by layers of sheltering bubbles. I count them gratefully: our idyllic friendly neighborhood in the Oakland Hills; our welcoming comfortable home of forty-six years; our loving marriage and warm family relationships; our relative good health for two octogenarians. In these ways, we are bubbled in safety of a sort.

At the same time, being perched on an earthquake fault near regional parks keeps us painfully aware that any day, our bubbles could be ravaged by earthquake and/or wildfire. Inevitably, our relative good health bubble is just one diagnosis away from bursting.

As luck would have it, when most medical procedures are cancelled during the early months of the pandemic, two close family members get diagnoses that require medical procedures and our bubbles of safety start bursting in air.

George’s heart reverts from normal rhythm to atrial fibrillation and atrial flutter. It takes three cardioversion procedures between March and June to jolt his

heart back into a normal rhythm that lasts. Finally, with the help of an additional medication, the third procedure takes hold and, fortunately, his heart remains stable to date.

In February our older son Dan is alarmed that his that his legs are getting progressively weaker and more wobbly and his hands are losing sensation. By mid-March, an MRI confirms that he has cervical stenosis and a surgical procedure called a laminoplasty is scheduled for the end of April. If delayed or unsuccessful, his prognosis is almost too grim to imagine. If successful, the surgery will relieve the pressure on his spinal cord and prevent permanent nerve damage. The extensive four-hour surgery is followed by weeks in recovery to prove its success. Months of accumulated tension are replaced by months of relief and joy as we monitor Dan's reports of the gradual and steady return of strength, balance, and sensation.

The above two medical ordeals, prolonged and vastly complicated by the demands of the pandemic, are followed by three medical shake-ups that appear to be the pandemic itself invading our family big-time. Each of our two adult children run brief low-grade fevers and one of our young adult grandchildren has a long bout of lost senses of smell and taste. Since one of our sons visited us on the day before his fever, when he would have been infectious, the nine-day wait for his test results is especially excruciating.

While waiting for test results during the three shake-ups, I imagine all the obscure ways in which exposure may occur in spite of safety precautions. One of my favorites is unknowingly inhaling an infected person's aerosol by occupying the space where the person has been. I sense the vulnerability of those who, because they cannot afford to shelter-in-place, are forced to rely far too much on sheer luck for protection. The role of luck competes with my conviction that sufficient caution can guarantee protection from Covid-19.

My bubble of safety, an obsolete illusion, becomes history. I feel more vulnerable than I've ever felt.

### *CELEBRATED AND BESIEGED*

September fourth is George and my sixtieth wedding anniversary. Having ditched all our grand pre-pandemic party and travel plans, how can we celebrate? We're grateful to luck out with a smoke-free day and take off for a San Francisco adventure, just the two of us and our adopted grand-dog Mokie.

Leaving our sheltered lives to drive across the Bay Bridge thrills us—we feel like a pair of once-wild birds, liberated from the safety of our confining cage, back into the wild.

Golden Gate Park fills the bill for a safe day in the city. We walk around Stow Lake several times, this way and that, up and down, soaking in the ambiance of the landscaping and gentle weather on a perfect clear day, especially enjoying the waterfall and Mokie's choices of greet-worthy dogs and their owners. We take masked and unmasked selfies in the ornate pagoda and drive to The Park Chalet's just-reopened outdoor dining area.

The Park Chalet staff greets us by taking our temperatures via foreheads before seating us for a blissful garden lunch, well-distanced from other exuberant, so-glad-to-be-back Park-Chalet-ers. Then home for our nap, champagne toast, and takeout dinner from our favorite local restaurant for celebrating special events, Bellanico.

We haven't fine-dined in so long that everything we taste is exquisite to our palettes. We start with *Cicchetti*, an assortment of Venetian snacks that we savor one by one, from the simplicity of the citrus marinated Castelvetro olives to the smoothness of the duck liver pâté with red onion jam and crostini. By the time we sample the Antipasti, Primi, and Secondi, we're well into a culinary swoon, not to mention Cantucci, the best ever assorted cookies, for dessert.

In spite of everything, by the end of the day, we feel that we celebrated our treasured sixty-year-old marriage with ample excitement and delight.

Daily afternoon walks in the woods, people-avoidant and masked, with George and Mokie, are my sanity-maintaining respite—the highpoint of each day.

When week twenty-two ushers in a heat wave, we adapt—exercising, gardening and snatching our redwoods solace in the morning; keeping a bowl of ice in front of our electric fan in the late afternoon and evening; and going to bed early to shorten hot and muggy evenings and prolong the relative cool of the mornings.

But when we awake on Sunday, August sixteenth to thunder and lightning, we are filled with dread. The fire danger is at its peak, warranting a Red Alert.

On Wednesday, August nineteenth, the restraints tighten further. Climate fires strike California with a vengeance. Smoke permeates Alameda County's air. Evacuations in surrounding counties mean that thousands of people have to maintain six-foot distance and wear N95 masks while being herded to safety. I can't begin to imagine the impact on families with children and old people. How much more can they bear?

And when we awake on Wednesday, September ninth, to a dark day, when the sun seems not to rise, we feel utterly besieged. Is it the end of time?

The next day, when daylight breaks through the dense smoke and ash, we can't be more grateful. Our beloved redwoods are not in flames and we don't have to evacuate. Our electricity is constant in spite of warnings of rolling blackouts. There is

no sign of an earthquake, especially the looming big one. Our water is safe and our plumbing is functioning. We count our blessings and grieve for all the people whose homes are destroyed, for the firefighters, and for the evacuated.

On those days when a pall of smoke envelopes Alameda County, we must choose between sacrificing a degree of cardiovascular and mental health on the one hand, and risking lung disease from inhaling toxic particles in the pall of smoke on the other. It is an easy choice. We stay indoors, moving like zombies in the heat, doors and windows shut, and with no AC, feeling besieged.

### *DE-WORDED, SUFFOCATED AND JADED*

It has taken me a lot of effort to put my take on Trump into words. I've quipped, "He makes Nixon look good. He even makes Nero look good—blovating and golfing while the entire planet burns."

At first, I refer to his *gross incompetence*. That is totally unsatisfying. To be grossly incompetent seems relatively benign compared to what he is. I try *debased*, *deranged*, *savagely nihilistic*, *a monstrous tyrant*. Nothing feels adequate until I consult with my word-loving brother and he suggests *depraved*. Finally, a word that satisfies me! That single word captures Trump's shameless abject wanton corruption so well that it helps me cope on a daily basis. Unlikely and unfortunate an adjective as it is for our POTUS, *depraved* fills the bill, it gratifies like none other—our very own *depraved* current President of the United States.

2020 is a suffocating year. Images of innocent Americans being suffocated to death by dissociated-looking police are lodged in my psyche. I fear the many ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic makes breathing in the presence of others mutually dangerous. I fear the impact of the climate fires—making it unsafe to inhale and all too often hazardous. I feel stifled and even crushed by the magnitude and impact of multiple global and national crises. Every single day, I feel my breath taken away by the endless news cycles about how every single crisis is denied, exploited, and exacerbated by our current administration.

George and I are opposites in so many ways. Most significantly, he is a pragmatic optimist and I am an idealistic pessimist. He laughs at our current administration, while I groan and curse at it. At times, George says things that strike me as totally absurd.

"The fires will end." To which I say, "But . . ."

“The climate will improve.” To which I say “But . . .”  
“All will be well.” To which I say, “But . . .”  
I’m convinced that one of us must be crazy. Either he’s hopelessly naive or  
I’m hopelessly jaded.  
For all of us now alive, for future generations, and for the future of planet earth,  
I hope beyond hope that I am the one who is crazy.

*SUE EZEKIEL*







## APPENDIX 1: WHO WE ARE

*SUE EZEKIEL*, first generation American, born and raised in the Bronx, New York, lives in the Oakland Hills with her husband of sixty years. A retired psychotherapist, when she's not engaged with her family, friends, and communities or hiking the Oakland Regional Park trails, she's working on her latest writing project, revising forgotten drafts and collecting them to leave a trace of herself for her children and grandchildren. She helps our group stay organized by keeping current our documents related to our weekly schedule, pre-Covid (and hopefully, post-Covid) annual retreats, and *Berries from Brambles* schedule.

*KAREN GRASSLE* is an actress best known for her role as “Ma” on the internationally known TV series, *Little House on the Prairie*. This year, she would have enjoyed playing in the Stephen Sondheim musical, *A Little Night Music* but for a worldwide pandemic. A founder of Addison Street Writers Circle, Karen is ratified to experience the growth and solidarity that have come from our collective effort. To contribute to literacy while schools are shuttered, and to extend a hand to parents and teachers with Zoom hours to fill, she created a YouTube channel—*Storytime with Karen*—and has been reading stories, classic and contemporary, entertaining and relevant. Here is the Intro and a connection to some of the stories: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCk457PrEO4Kyfk1K-687yAw>

*RUTH A. HANHAM* and her husband, a congenial fellow-historian from New Zealand, live dangerously among the tinder-dry hills of Kensington, smack on the Hayward fault. A “faculty brat,” she grew up in Berkeley but then the tailoress sneaked off to Stanford to earn a BA and MA in history, followed by a Ph.D. from Harvard. She won a guest editorship on *Mademoiselle* magazine. She taught in Hong Kong, India and at a University near Boston. Ruth zig-zagged into the field of old age care, then became the vice president of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Committee for Elder Affairs and went as a delegate to the White House Conference on Aging. She had a modest number of articles published in historical journals, a women's magazine, and the *Journal of Public Health*. She then spent fifteen years in deeply unfashionable northwestern England after her husband was named head of its main university. She won a small British literary prize for a short story, read two of her poems on regional BBC, and wrote a novel set in Edwardian British India. Back in the East Bay, she's writing another historical novel based on a memoir bequeathed to her by a Polish Jewish friend who survived the Nazi occupation of Poland in hiding.

*ELEANOR LEW* was born in Chinatown, San Francisco. She has lived and worked in Austria, England, Taiwan, Tunisia, India and Washington, D.C. Over the years she accumulated four academic degrees in biology and genetics, Chinese literature and anthropology, international relations, and psychology. She has finally come home to herself as a marriage and family therapist. Eleanor has had three of her essays published by the New York Times: “One Moment You See, Then You Don’t,” “Travelers in the Dark,” and “Doctor, I’m Going Blind. Why Won’t You Talk To Me?” In this year of the pandemic, Eleanor wrote her piece for the eleventh Berries From Bramble while working with her clients, facilitating a low-vision support group, getting evicted from her office, moving from her home into another, completing her revocable trust and will, writing her professional will, and fighting an insect infestation in her home. But throughout it all she managed to retain her sense of humor.

*VIVIAN PISANO* was born in Chile and came to the U.S. at the age of ten where she grew up in Sacramento. She came to the Bay Area in the mid 1970s and found her home here in Berkeley. Vivian retired ten years ago after a long career as a librarian. She has been working on a memoir of her childhood and beyond.

*KATE “CRICKET” POPE* grew up in Berkeley as a philosophy faculty brat. Despite two years at Stanford, she graduated from Cal Berkeley. She then wandered the Continent for a post-graduation summer, married in Paris, lived for six years in Nuremberg, Germany, and returned to the Bay Area with three energetic offspring, soon joined by two more. She punctuated domesticity with backpacking, mountain climbing, ski racing, her divorce at age 40, a master’s degree, and gainful employment throughout. A two-month trek in Asia in 1980, a mountain climb in the Caucasus three years later and her second marriage inaugurated four adventurous decades of world travel characterized by her proclivity for high mountains and the untouristed locale. Kate writes memoir, and we happily report that, perhaps inspired by her ninetieth birthday, she has been more focused of late on her literary endeavors.

*ANNA RABKIN* was born in Poland, spent her teenage years in England, France and eventually, New York. She and her husband Marty migrated to Berkeley where they raised their two children. Anna received a master’s degree in City Planning, served as Berkeley’s elected city auditor for fifteen years, and upon retirement chaired the Berkeley Public Library Foundation’s capital campaign for the Downtown Library while completing a graduate program in history. In 2003 she and four others

founded the Free Agents at Berkeley (FAB) a network of retired women that has grown from 28 to 300 members. With her husband, she co-authored *Public Libraries: Travel Treasures of the West* which was published in 1994 by North American Press.

In 2018, her memoir *From Kraków to Berkeley: Coming out of Hiding*, was published in England, by Vallentine Mitchell, the original publishers of *Anne Frank's Diary*. She has given many book talks focused on the issue of displacement both in the Bay Area, London, New York, Montgomery, Ala. She was one of five featured authors at the YWCA's Festival of Women Authors, and at the Berkeley Public Library Foundation Authors' Dinner. Articles about her book have appeared in the *Berkeleyside*, *Hidden Child Magazine*; J., *the Jewish news weekly of northern California*, and in California State University, East Bay's *History Newsletter*. Excerpts from her book were included in the Heyday 2019 book, *The Battle for People's Park, Berkeley 1969*, by Tom Dalzell. Just prior to Covid-19, she participated in the Julia Morgan School for Girls' *Women of Courage Panel* honoring Rosa Parks.

*MARTINA REAVES* grew up in a Navy family and lived in thirty-four places before she finally settled in her current home in Berkeley with her wife, Tanya, and their son, Cooper. She considers living in one place for almost thirty-five years a major accomplishment. A lawyer, she limited her practice to mediation in 1986 and worked with divorcing couples and neighbors with disputes. In 2007, she began writing fiction and memoir and has been at it ever since. She loves to create serenity in her home, reading, going to plays, and the music venue Freight and Salvage. Her memoir, *I'm Still Here*, was published by She Writes Press in April 2020. The book was awarded a Gold Medal (Grief/Death and Dying) from Living Now Awards and a Silver Metal from Readers' Favorites (Non-fiction: Health/Medical). Shorter works of memoir appear in KQED's *Perspectives* and in various on-line journals, including *Persimmon Tree*, *Months to Years*, *Coping with Cancer*, and *Inter-Connecting Circles*. She is currently completing her second memoir, *Ebb & Flow*.

*MARYLY SNOW*, another founder of Addison Street Writers Circle, was born in Oakland, the eldest of three girls raised by her single, divorced mother. When Maryly retired from UC Berkeley's Architecture Visual Resources Library in 2007, she received the honorific "Emerita," along with "Distinguished," in lieu of a 5% merit-based pay increase thirty years prior. As a Distinguished Emerita Librarian, she still would have preferred the 5% increase. Maryly continues to be a visual artist, printmaker (admitted by jury review to California Society of Printmakers in 1990), Zentangle teacher (Certified 2015), founder of the International Toothbrush Collection, beekeeper, bridge player, and book club reader. Childless, Maryly is

thankful that technically she's not a spinster because she was married in the way-back. Once freed from marriage, Maryly charted her own course, helping develop access to images on the internet while living in a succession of Bay Area artist live-work lofts before moving to a many-times-published small house at the end of the road in Chabot Canyon where she lives with her two cats, three beehives, and annual visits by herds of goats gobbling up the wild-fire tinder of wild mustard, star thistle, and fennel. This year Maryly cancelled her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday whale-watching trip and her trip to the Norwegian Arctic with her favorite travel partner, the cheerfully resolute Kate Pope. In lieu of travel, Maryly posted her first, and so far only, video to YouTube featuring her *Pandemic Paradox* drawings (several of which are shown in this *Berries From Brambles* #11. See YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/MarylySnow>

*LINDA NORTHRUP SONDHEIMER* grew up and got her Bachelor's Degree in Buffalo, NY. In hippie girl adventure, she came out to San Francisco in the 70s. It was love at first sight. Eventually, like many others, she realized her painting degree was not a ticket to fame and fortune. After graduate school, she found her true calling as an educator and considers it the most creative thing she has ever done. She is now retired, drawing and writing fiction and some memoir. She and her husband Fred live in Berkeley and fondly reminisce about their busy pre-Covid days with concerts, art museums and many, many travels. They bask in the camaraderie and support of three adult children and two sweet and helpful grandchildren.

## *APPENDIX 2: OUR READING LIST*

### *OCT. 2019 - OCT. 2020*

Harjo, Joy. "Washing My Mother's Body" from *An American Sunrise: Poems*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 2019.

Kadish, Rachel. *The Weight of Ink*, pp. 403-407. Boston: Houston Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

LeGuin, Ursula K. "Going Over Eighty," "In Your Spare Time," "The Sissy Strikes Back" from *No Time to Spare: Thinking About What Matters*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

Logan, William Bryant. "I Hallucinated When I Had Covid: Here's What I Saw," Opinion, *New York Times*, 10/6/20.

Mantel, Hilary. *Giving Up the Ghost*, pp. 122-125. London: Fourth Estate, 2003.

McPhee, John. "Tabula Rosa," (excerpts). *The New Yorker*, 1/13/20.

Murakami, Haruki. "Abandoning a Cat: Memories of My Father." *The New Yorker*, 9/30/19.

Orange, Tommy. *There There*, pp. 134-141. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018.

Price, Lois. "A Curious Invitation," chapter 1, pp. 1-5, in *Revolutionary Ride*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2017.

Rich, Ronda. *What Southern Women Know About Flirting*, pp. 54-61. New York: Penguin, 2005.

## *APPENDIX 3: A YEAR OF SHARED WRITINGS*

### *OCT. 2019 - OCT. 2020*

Below are writings by our members as we have workshopped them with each other. Our work grows with audience and informed feedback. Dates indicate the time of sharing with the group, although pieces may have been in process for various spans of time, before and after sharing.

Ezekiel, Sue, "My Relationship With Yiddish," 1/23/20; "My Relationship With Yiddish," revised, 5/28/20; "Viruses," 8/6/20; "Next Year in Person," 10/15/20.

Grassle, Karen, Proposed untitled op/ed on climate change strategy, 2/27/20; "Just Let Me Go," 4/2/20; "Far Out," 6/18/20; "Far Out," revised, 8/27/20.

Hanham, Ruth, "The Weird New World of Vanishing Objects," 2/6/20; "Musings About My Mother," 6/9/20; "Musings About My Mother," revised, 8/19/20.

Lew, Eleanor, "It's Our Democracy, Stupid!" 11/7/19; "Tail Wagging the Dog," 2/20/20; "Getting Here," 4/9/20; "Shoo Shoo," 6/25/20; "Reveries, Inside Outside," 10/8/20.

Pisano, Vivian, "We Must Go To This," 11/14/19; "Covignettes: A New Normal, Covid Dreams, Day 129, You Say You Want a Revolution," 7/30/20; "Covignettes: At My Window, Mutable Time," 9/3/20.

Pope, Kate "Ed: Vignettes of My Father," 5/21/20; "Four in a Bathtub," 6/4/20; "Auto Biography," 7/2/20; "Covidities: Thoughts When You Are Ancient," 9/10/20.

Rabkin, Anna, "Success," 11/21/19; "From Wife to Widow," 4/16/20; "Sequestered Children," 7/9/20; "Not Age, Attitude," 8/13/20; "In Transit," 9/17/20; "Triggered," 10/29/20.

Reaves, Martina, "Failing to Die," 12/5/19; "Coping and Hoping," 1/16/20; "Epilogue 2020," 2/27/20; "Life Now," 5/7/20; "The Year My Mother Died," flash memoir 9/16/20; "The Year My Mother Died," Part 2, 9/24/20.

Snow, Maryly, "Covid's March," 10/01/20.

Sondheimer, Linda, “Drunk Dad Sober Dad,” 10/3/19; “Is It Time?” 3/19/20;  
“Kim and Andrew 1985,” 4/23/20; “We Are Happy in Our Way,” 7/23/20.



## *ADDISON STREET WRITERS CIRCLE AUGUST 2020.*

Row 1: Ruth Hanham — Maryly Snow  
Row 2: Karen Grassle — Sue Ezekiel  
Row 3: Vivian Pisano — Linda Sondheimer.  
Row 4: Kate Pope — Eleanor Lew  
Row 5: Martina Reaves — Anna Rabkin

