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Contents

Foreword	9
The New Normal (1st PRIZE) - C Burke	10
Search: 'How to make friends' (2 nd Prize) - H Larder.....	11
Isolation is... (3rd Prize) - B Crossley.....	13
Untitled (Special Mention) - J Grace.....	14
Still here (Special Mention) - K Foster	15
Home...Sweet Home? (Special Mention) - H Titterton.....	17
A Surgeon meets the Virus: a conversation - D Lumb.....	18
Alone Again 2 - P Neale.....	19
I don't want to be alone tonight - M Leonard.....	20
Untitled - D Siddon.....	21
Dawn On The Mountain - C Soma	22
Old Age and Isolation-the cruelty of Covid - M Cooper.....	23
Forever in Lockdown - S Higgins	24
Isolation - A Cunningham.....	25
10 days of Isolation - R Slack.....	26
Isolation Education - C Brewer	27
A Muted Life - A Stone	29
Isolation - H Carter	30
On Reflection - D Slack.....	31
A lament for Sarah - J Copson	32
Poem for the Lockdown - D Finlayson.....	33
Alternative Christmas Card 2020 - J Chappell.....	34
THE LONELINESS OF NOW (Short Listed) - B Millward	35
Who's turn is it to make the tea? - D Harvey	37
My Resilience - D Child	38
Outside In - D Duncombe	39
For The Voice That Makes A Difference - A Slater.....	40
The Magic Smile - R Jozefczyk	41
Untitled - J Robson.....	42
Choices - D Botham.....	43
For you - L Bagley	44

No longer the “ happy to chat bench” - T Fisher.....	45
NO ISOLATION, UNTIL... - R Lowe	46
I was not expecting that - A Hughes	48
...and this is what it is like or what it is like in words.* - C Taylor	49
Wishing Them Here - D Wood	51
My Daughter's Face - E Mills-Wallace	52
Isolation (Shortlisted)- S Kempsey.....	53
Isolation - C Taylor	55
An t-Oileán Uaigneach [The Lonely Isle] - P Kendall.....	57
I am in Solitude - L Morris	58
Survival (Not a poem) - R Barrett.....	60
Touch - C Thompson	62
The Fish on an Iced-Over Pond - A Beresford.....	63
ISOLATION - T Haddon.....	64
Lockdown Blues - I Mosley.....	66
Feelings of isolation - R Oldfield	68
Lockdown Lin - J Wilkinson	70
Forgotten - N Moncrieff.....	72
A Start - A Morton	73
Isolation - R Horne.....	75
Untitled - J Groarke.....	77
The Fly Tyer - D Ramsay	79
Untitled - K Ryan.....	81
Isolation Working From Home - A Jones	82
ALONE - S Boyle.....	84
Isolation - J Sheldon	85
Untitled - L Knight	86
Coronavirus - G Mulliner	88
Isolation - F Towns	89
Touch - S Aitch.....	90
Untitled - J Hibbert.....	91
Isolation? - E Silvey.....	92
Untitled - C Pfaff	93

A Haiku Journey Through the Pandemic - M Woodcock	95
New Shoots - A Franks.....	98
Isolation - A Cooper.....	99
Reading to escape - G Southall.....	100
Isolation - P Jones.....	101
Seaside Sweeper - R Dawson.....	103
THE ULTIMATE ISOLATION - D Williams	104
Tuna and Sweetcorn - L Harvey.....	106
ISOLATION - M Hambidge	107
Isolation in Belper: a fantasy - A Rapkin.....	108
The Clock - E Marshall	109
Isolation Rows - N Davey.....	110
Isolation - P Holmes	113
Isolation - D Hidson.....	115
Isolation - G Byrom-Smith	116
A LULLABY FROM HOME (Shortlisted) - J King.....	117
Staying Put - D Wells	119
The Lonely Soldier - D McAra	121
My Lockdown Visitor - M Doolan.....	123
ISOLATION - P Hunter.....	124
The Smile (Shortlisted) - B Saxton.....	125
Untitled - S Davies.....	126
Nothing lasts forever - P Scales	127
Tarts and Vicars and the not so lost dog - P Brentnall.....	128
Grey shadows in between - K Jackson	129
Untitled - J Leonard	133
A different bed (Shortlisted) - U Ochu	135
Untitled - A Simpson	137
A life low on dopamine (Shortlisted) - J White.....	140
Me, My Cat and Lockdown - S Williams	142
His night and mine - S Br otzman	144
Night Hiking Isolation - T Wilmshurst.....	146
The PM's Tale - D Wood.....	147

Locked In Memories - B Hayter	149
Isolation With Mother - S Wilbourne.....	152
Never Alone - M Simpson	154
Isolation Creeps: a warning (Shortlisted) - C Burton	155
Having the last word - P Green	157
A tale of unfriendly encounters in isolation	157
Waiting for your touch (Shortlisted) - L Winson.....	159
Rocky (Shortlisted) - S Hanes	160
All but gone - D Poole-Bailey	161
A Trip Down Memory Lane - K Waldram.....	162
Isolation - R Greaves.....	164
DOES ANYONE DO ISOLATION LIKE ME - J Dysfunctional.....	166
“BEWARE OF ISOLATION” - L Hind	168
Isolated in Eyam - A Millican	170
Isolation - C Bagnall	171
Isolation - T McDonnell	172
The sky is dark - D McDonnell	174
St Beatrice (Shortlisted) - G Durrant.....	175
Isolation (Shortlisted) - C Brook	177
ONE (Shortlisted) - B Artuso.....	179
The Walk - F Sykes.....	180
Lodge Moor Isolation - S Briddon	181
Shadows - S Williams	182
The Indifference of the Night - S Cardew	184
The Survivor - P Gough.....	186
The Challenge (Shortlisted) - P Walker.....	188
A COVER (Shortlisted) - E Fearn	190
The Fox and The Midnight Forest - N Wallace	192
Still here (Shortlisted) - K Foster	194
Having Time to Question Things - B Walker.....	196
Untitled - K Hockney	198
Untitled - Njoki	200
The Man on the Moon - E Vincent	202

Foreword

The past 12 months has brought about a lot of change to the lives of us all. The restrictions on our daily lives, what we can do, and what we can't, was the impetus for Derbyshire Libraries to launch a writing competition on the theme of isolation.

Supported by funding from the Arts Council, Derbyshire Libraries were successful in bidding to participate in the BBC Novels That Shaped Our World programme. Attracting writers and poets alike, the standard of writing was extremely high. We are honouring all eligible entries with the publication of this eBook for all to enjoy.

Congratulations to our winners, and to all that entered. We wish you all a safe, happy, and prosperous future.

~ Helen, Kirstie, Dan and Aniliese

Derbyshire Libraries

A word from our judges:

'It's been my absolute pleasure to help judge this wonderful competition. It seems that Derbyshire has some excellent writers and this theme, with its deep resonances in what has been such a hard year, really brought out the best in them. That made my job exceptionally hard but very rewarding and I offer my heartfelt congratulations to the winners, the runners-up and all who entered.'

~ Anna Stuart

'I was incredibly impressed at the standard of all these entries. Although they shared a common theme of "Isolation", each had a unique take on this theme, and choosing these pieces was no easy task. This has been an important project at an incredibly difficult time, and it's been a pleasure to be involved. Huge congratulations to the winners, runners up and all the writers who entered the competition.'

~ Emma Pass



Photo Credit © Helen Cunningham

CONTROLLED

The New Normal (1st PRIZE) - C Burke

There's no return
to the everyday normal, I tell myself,
though there are glimpses of it now and then
when I can suddenly recall how
to tie a lace, zip a coat, button a cardie.

Looking ahead, I foresee the mass resetting of compasses
when I will take a measure of it in my absence,
locked down, locked in, locked out
of this troubled body and this wounded world.

Accept, adapt, adjust I'm told.
Find new ways to be, to speak, to move.
I'm in training now, adjusting, with you all,
within this stilted setting
of collective restrictedness.

Ever more neurodivergent, I have grown into the landscape,
becoming the colours of the sky, the earth, the trees.
So well camouflaged am I
the challenge to come
will be not to disappear.

Search: 'How to make friends' (2nd Prize) - H Larder

This is what happened.

Following my plan, I watched her every Sunday afternoon as she walked past my window with binoculars strung round her delicate neck. Her clothes were a subtle jumble of camouflage browns and greens and her stooped shouldered stride seemed tentative.

The first couple of Sundays, as she approached, I stood by my front gate staring at the trees opposite and consulting my Collins guide to birds of Britain and Europe but she didn't glance at me.

Often, as she passed the gardens on my street, she stopped, completely still; listening. The way she held her head to one side made something beat its wings inside my stomach.

Most of my web searches said, 'Join a social group for people with similar interests to you'. *Hopeless*. Even if every face to face group ever opened again, the thought of joining any kind of *club* made the skin on the back of my shoulders feel as if it was crawling off my body. How was it possible that I'd reached forty two years old and never been able to find a friend? I really missed sitting on the edge of all the coffee break chatter since I'd been forced to submit the company accounts from home. Still, I realised, hearing the women from the office talking about their children, their holidays and their husband's misdemeanours didn't make them my friends, however much I wished it did.

On the third Sunday, I followed her. At a safe distance. I saw her turn into a lane ahead but I was so far behind that when I reached the path, she'd disappeared. Fluttering loss rose in my chest.

The next Sunday, she didn't show at all. All afternoon, I waited, not moving from the window. A scorched ache tightened around my throat as I worried she'd been blown off course, until I remembered, no one was flying anywhere now.

When Sunday slouched around again, I was ready. This time I kept up with her, Close to the hedgerows. While she raised her binoculars in a slow arc, I focused on the way the breeze ruffled through her short, mousy hair and the eiderdown fluff at the nape of her neck. My heart inflated, all helium, as I willed myself to start a conversation for the first time in my life.

I shifted closer. *C'mon, I told myself. Speak.*

Her shoulders twitched.

'Is it a goldfinch?' I whispered. 'I've seen them here before'. I took a deep breath. 'Hi, I'm Rachel.'

Her frown creased deeper. My cheeks chargrilled. Peeled raw.

Act normal, my brain screamed at me, *so she doesn't think you're a stalker*.
Charcoal clouds weighed heavily above our heads.

'What can you see?' I tried again.

'A dunnock.'

My mind grasped a quote from the Collin's guide. 'Small, brown, sparrow like.'

She sighed.

Small, brown sparrow like. Yes, you are, I thought.

Without turning, her hand formed a flapping signal, waving me away.

Isolation is... (3rd Prize) - B Crossley

when he follows you around the house,
saying 'Who're you texting, who're you talking to,
who're you Facetiming, two-timing, doing it with?'
Saying 'You haven't kissed me enough, said you loved
me enough, made love to me enough and what're you
wearing that for? Friends, what friends, they're not real friends, you don't need
friends, aren't
I enough for you? Who're you looking at, who're you
listening to, who's that on your screen, shut it down, switch it off,
I hate that music, dance for me. What - ? Working
from home? You're looking at men, you're making eyes at men, you're
flirting with men, don't look them in the eye, look down, you don't need to go out
I'll buy the
food, you cook it, don't you want to please me, don't you love me? Why're you drinking
wine, are you a lush? You're a tart. Don't turn your back on me - yes, it's meant
to hurt, say you're sorry, are you sorry? Who're you phoning, what're you -?
Give me that phone, I'm keeping it. Don't turn on the waterworks - are you sorry?
I didn't do that, you bit your own lip, you made me do it, you should've just given it, you
should've... You know I love you doll, it's you, you drive me crazy, you're so beautiful I
want to -
I want to... I'm sorry, I mean it, come here... it won't happen again, again, again. Yeah, I'll
change, no I will, make a new start...
Don't start, don't start, don't leave me. You're killing me.
Don't break my heart.'
Isolation is not
Being alone.

Untitled (Special Mention) - J Grace

I've been wearing my wellingtons for nearly a year. Now I consider them to be part of my isolation chic wardrobe. When I learnt the family were to be at home permanently, I marched down the garden. The summerhouse would be my residence from now on.

The wheelbarrow proved useful for loading up my supplies for lockdown. As I trundled off my daughter shouted "Make sure you use the outside loo and shower room Mother ". I was only called " Mother " when in her opinion I wasn't acting my age. My Arthur had put together the summerhouse in 1995, so it was holding together well. Each year I slashed colourful paint on to keep it waterproof, but it's a task I'm barely winning. We had some hot summer nights down there, over the years, and I don't mean the weather.

This part of the garden is not tended, so we call it the jungle. A twisted old cooking apple tree tried it's best but produced very little. What flowers there are grow nearer to the house. The door creaked when I opened it, but stepping inside I felt it was the beginning of an adventure. I have never been keen on people, especially my family. It's my house but no-one would know. My son in law calls me eccentric. They shouted down I'd be lonely, I shouted back I'd get a bit of peace. March is an unpredictable month at best, so I switched on the electric fire and the glow made it immediately homely. Sitting down on the settee, I closed my eyes for a few minutes. Then I fancied a cuppa, so I put on the kettle. A drop of whiskey in it too would do me the world of good.

Mrs Price, next door, has always been nosey. Lives with her son, who's 43, he works at the sewerage plant. He wears orange waders at home, say no more. I'm sure she spied me coming down here, yes, there she is at the back bedroom, with her binoculars. I wave, she ducks out of sight. The kitchen window was still open, Sally was at the sink. " I'm using the facilities " I told her. " If there's only you going to be in there, I'm putting in the cheaper loo roll. " Charming!

This saga was months ago, I'm still here, loving every day. I listen to Radio 4, it gives me food for thought. Reading invites me to imagine. Nature makes me wonder, the birds are used to me now and feed close by. The sun does me good. I exercise with baked bean tins in each hand. Fitter than ever, happier than ever. My isolation heaven.

Still here (Special Mention) - K Foster

Vivienne pointed to her usual space in front of the window. The care home staff had tried to involve her in the daily activities but each time Vivienne shook her head and pointed to the window, staring out of it for hours. Tears pricked her eyes as she silently recollected her life. If only the staff and other residents could hear inside her head they would see that she had lead a wonderful life. How she longed to tell her stories, to laugh again. But the stroke had cruelly robbed her of that. Now she felt humiliated and weak. She did not want pity, so she kept herself away and relived her past in isolation.

Hester had arrived in the country two months ago with only basic English language skills. The students in her class had made her feel welcome, and she tried hard in school, appreciative of the opportunity to learn. Her teachers noted that she was old beyond her years. She had a seriousness and maturity that came only with the experiences that Hester had had. Experiences no one, especially not a young girl should have had.

The school bus pulled up outside the care home. The school had joined a local project to help bring old and young together. The students excitedly climbed out, looking forward to the afternoon playing, reading, singing and dancing with the friends they had made on their previous visits.

It was Hester's first visit. She took the hand of her teacher, who led her into the large living room, alive with talking and laughing. Looking around they could only see one resident currently without a school buddy. Hester and her teacher walked over to the woman staring out of the window.

"Hello, this is Hester. She would like to sit with you today. Is that ok?"

There was no response.

A care home worker walked over and started talking to Hester's teacher. "Vivienne had a stroke recently. She's still recovering and doesn't really like company..." As they continued talking, Hester walked over to Vivienne, gently touched her hand, smiled and said a quiet hello. She sat down and got her drawing pencils and book out. She studiously started drawing a picture. When it was done, she placed it on Vivienne's lap.

"For you."

Vivienne looked at the sweet little girl, and then down at the picture. It was of a flower. A gesture of kindness, not pity. Although Vivienne's mouth could not move in the way she wanted, the emotion in her eyes showed all the gratitude she wanted to display and a beaming smile broke out across the little girls face.

"I'm Hester. What's your name?"

She handed Vivienne a piece of paper and pencil. Vivienne shakily wrote "Viv" on the paper.

“I sometimes find it hard to talk too Viv. I think we should be friends.”

Vivienne nodded. Hester sat next to her and grabbed her hand, as they looked out of the window together.

Home...Sweet Home? (Special Mention) - H Titterton

Dedicated Joan Winifred Titterton

Morning

Mum used to say “good things come to those who wait”. I spend my days waiting but not a lot of good comes of it. Right now, I’m waiting to get up, I’m bursting to go, but the bed covers are too heavy for me to lift. I’m stranded on my back, like that dead ladybird on the window ledge.

A shadow flicks across the crack of light at the doorway. That’ll be one of the Monitors on her rounds. All the care ladies have left, even my Nadia has gone. She was kind to me. I miss her smile. The Monitors rustle in and rustle out of the room, muttering to themselves as they go. They have big, starey eyes but you can’t see their faces or understand what they say. Their hands and bodies are blue and coated in something, like rubber or plastic. They smell a bit funny.

I wish I hadn’t drunk that cup of tea, I really need to go. My Mum used to say I was an accident waiting to happen...and she is about to be right!

There’s something stuck in my teeth, it’s been there all night, I keep wagging it with my tongue but I can’t move it. It feels like a raspberry pip. I tried to tell the Monitor I don’t like raspberries but she didn’t understand and gave them to me anyway. The cream helped hide the taste.

My legs are aching. I need to get up and get ready just in case Mum visits today.

Evening

Mum used to say “time waits for no man”; she was always in a hurry with the five of us and a house to look after.

Nothing hurries here.

I wanted to wear my dress today in case someone visits but the Monitor didn’t understand and she put me in my usual cardy. It’s got a stain on it. Nobody has called so it doesn’t really matter.

That raspberry pip is making my teeth ache.

There’s a paper open on my lap. There’s a photo of people banging on saucepans and clapping. I try to read the words but none of it makes sense, the letters all jumble together. I’ll ask Mum about it when she comes. I hope she remembers how to find me. It’s getting dark outside. It will soon be too late for anyone to call. I take a sip from my cup but the tea has gone cold and it tastes bitter on my tongue. Sometimes I feel so alone, like waiting to be collected from school, the chatter of friends fading away, the rising panic of having been forgotten...

I’m woken by the shrill of a blackbird and I glance at the window. There’s somebody there, emerging from the shadows. My heart seems to miss a beat as I look more closely at the glass, suddenly recognising the familiar face staring back. We smile in unison, copying each other’s conspiratorial wink.

Mum’s here at last.

A Surgeon meets the Virus: a conversation - D Lumb

Surgeon: In our hospital the toughest times – when I’ve most felt like crying – have been those when I’ve been talking to patients about end-of-life care. At Chesterfield Royal we’re used to having end-of-life conversations. With this bastard virus, those who are dying at the Royal die with no family. They die alone – or no, not alone. No one in my ward dies without holding a nurse’s hand. Think of that. No family at death, just a nurse. That’s loneliness.

Virus: Who cares about a single nurse? I am, ladies and gentlemen, the virus. I have come among you. I didn’t just come in twenty twenty. My friends, I came in 1945, and in 1919, and in the Middle Ages. I was the Black Death. I am always with you.

Don’t fight me, my friends. I am the virus. Turn off the halo of terror that surrounds my name. We, viruses, from the bacterial background of the world, are the true continuum of life on Earth. Without us, you would never have seen the light of day, nor would the first cell. You would be even more alone.

Surgeon: We have to go through an elaborate ritual to dress for work. First we have our usual scrubs. Then an under-gown, long-sleeved, fluid-repellent: two pairs of disposal gloves, the outer pair taped to the gown; hair net; face mask; plastic shoes; visor. It’s like walking through glue. It slows everything down. Alone in a busy ward, cut off by the mask.

Virus: See it my way, my friend. We are your ancestors, just like stones and algae, and much more than monkeys. Stop saying that I’m the one killing you. You do not die from my action on your tissues, but from the lack of care of your fellow men.

Surgeon: We have a positive routine in the ward. We have a bell by the ward entrance. Every time a patient goes home the nurses ring the bell. It cheers up the staff a lot and other patients think, ‘Well, there is hope for me as well.’ Ring the bloody bell.

Virus: The bell? If you weren’t so rapacious, you would still have enough beds, nurses and respirators to survive the damage I do to your lungs. If you did not store your old people in dying rooms and your able-bodied people in reinforced concrete hutches, you would not be there. So stop blaming me, accusing me, tracking me down.

Surgeon: How we long for a cure: a jab that works

Virus: We clear out the sick and the lame and the dying for you. Save you lots of money. Then afterwards you can all go off on holiday. (pause) Or maybe not. Maybe the world will think again about long and expensive flights to foreign holidays. Maybe you’ll all slow down a bit. We are the eco-warriors you’ve all been waiting for. Stay alone in your fear.

Alone Again 2 - P Neale

Isabel stared out of the window for the umpteenth time. She looked at her watch and was becoming convinced that the minute hand was moving ever more slowly with each passing hour. She walked from the lounge and into the kitchen again, pausing to peer out of the back window and into the garden,

She sighed deeply; it had only been a day but she felt so desperately alone with no-one to talk to. The television wasn't much help – the news and all of the other programmes seemed to merge into one another in a mish-mash of irrelevance.

“What am I going to do?” she asked herself. “I can't go on like this. I feel so isolated.” The rattle at the front door had her hurrying from one end of the house to the other. It was just a batch of junk mail, but if she hurried and opened the front door she might be able to pass a word or two with the postman. She was too late – by the time she'd found the key and unlocked it he was gone. Isabel shook her head and retreated once again into the sanctuary that was becoming more like a prison.

She looked at the hall clock as she passed it – half past eleven. The morning was still meandering its lazy way towards midday; was it time for another coffee? How long had it been since the last one? Where was he? She sat at the kitchen table and then stood up again, remembering the reason for coming into the room. The kettle; yes, the kettle. “Take your time,” she said to herself. “Shall I have a couple of biscuits with it, or indulge in a piece of cake? Decisions. Decisions.”

She opted for the cake; pity he wasn't here to share it with her – that would have been nice. She could have made it a larger piece for the two of them. Reaching the tin down from the cupboard, Isabel placed the piece of cake meticulously in the centre of the plate and replaced the tin. Hearing the kettle whistling away, she turned to the cooker and made the coffee that was the final highlight of her morning. She looked at the kitchen clock.

“Where are you?” she asked, her voice beginning to betray an increasing sense of desperation. Leaving the coffee and cake, she walked again to the kitchen window and stared outdoors. Shaking her head in disappointment, she retraced her steps to the lounge window and gazed expectantly once more out into the street.

“Perhaps there's been an accident...” Her words went unfinished as there was a noise at the back door as the cat flap closed, and a ginger tom came strolling nonchalantly down the hall.

“Oh! There you are, Thomas. What a naughty boy for scaring Mummy so much. Come on; let's get you a nice saucer of milk. You can sit on my knee and we'll shut this nasty virus out.”

I don't want to be alone tonight - M Leonard

The Dr. Hook song played gently on the radio. Nothing else was gentle. Tables went flying, money fluttered down in the wind blowing in from the side door forced open by a heavy blow from a big red key – the standard UK police issue battering ram, a.k.a. the Enforcer. The police raid wasn't well received. Keen as the officers were, the usual suspects weren't playing by the same rules. Various weapons appeared from jackets and trouser pockets, knives of varying size and ornateness being the most favoured but yes, someone had secreted a labrys, a double-headed axe, in their jacket. It could have got nasty but someone pulled a gun and that was it. "Drop your weapons, now". A very audible warning rang through the hubbub followed quickly by a shot. The crack pierced the air and the assembled cast stopped being silly. The gunman, still holding his weapon, dropped to his knees and blood trickled from his chest. "Drop the weapon", drop the weapon". A second shot rang out and the gunman collapsed backwards on to the floor. A uniformed officer, heavily armoured head to foot in black protective clothing, moved in and retrieved the gun, a Beretta sixteen shot semi-automatic. The gunman was probably dead, or would be soon, but no-one else had been shot. Or stabbed. The motley crowd were searched, cuffed and despatched to waiting vans.

Upstairs police found, in two separate rooms, two very frightened customers huddled naked behind bedsheets and two very frightened young women. Young being under age. Fifteen, possibly. More likely fourteen, even thirteen, maybe. It was soon clear than neither spoke English and neither spoke the same language as the other. At a guess, Eastern European. Probably orphans, possibly sold to traffickers by their parents or, possibly, they had lied about their age in the hope of gaining promised lucrative employment in Western Europe where everyone is rich and life is easy.

Their stories were similar and familiar. This is Anna's story, Anna may not be her real name but it will suffice for this narrative. She was a child of Kosovo, her father killed during the civil war. Her mother, unable to find employment, deserted Anna, her brother and three sisters, all older. One day Anna went out to beg for food, when she returned later in the day another family were installed in the rented house. She never saw her siblings again. Desperate for food, and anything resembling affection, Anna took to earning a living by the only way she could. Soon she was controlled by a local gang. They traded her in to a bigger gang, eventually she ended up here.

"What put you on to this crew?" It was the Deputy Chief Constable asking Inspector Ryan, the officer in charge of the take-down. "Spelling. During an undercover operation one of the girls slipped a business card to my officer, on the rear, 'I don't want to be a loan tonight'"

Untitled - D Siddon

Bethought I to esteem an embrace so high
nor so crave a simple kiss?
In deep solitude needful now enforced
such simple pleasures miss.
We penitents in lonely cells sad dwell
along empty thoroughfares we walk.
Perchance fellow creatures happenstance to meet
across chasms perforce we talk.
Masks all smiles now obscure
all expressions wear disguise.
Fabrics vivid across our lips
can't hide fear within our eyes.
Lost in daydreams oft I think on you.
And.
My daydreaming fear becalms.
For Earth holds not half wealth enough
for a moment in your arms.

Dawn On The Mountain - C Soma

Dawn on the mountain
Sunlight sheds my serpentine skin
Whispers on the wind say it'll never end if you don't begin
And despite our scars
We'll taste those stars like water on our lips
Ghosts in the foothills of a mountain called bliss
I'll never be misunderstood
I'll never be cold, I'll never be the one who spits lies through their teeth and does what they're told
Because the expanse of those solitary skies lies behind my eyes
As they do yours
I won't be a martyr for your cause, stopped and stunted by your laws
Of what it means to be a member of this tribe called man
I'll do what I can to love and be loved
Memories are footprints in the sand
We stand in the foothills of a mountain called bliss
I stop and I smile and I greet the unknown with a kiss

Old Age and Isolation-the cruelty of Covid - M Cooper

Our lives have changed forever by this cruel disease . My generation has somehow become expendable, old age a barometer for life or death.

Nothing feels the same, sadness, depression, anxiety, and heartbreak has become the aching norm, Isolation is our constant enemy, I cry, I am lonely, I feel hopeless, help me please!

Happiness seems a distant memory

Love is tested as never before, so much has failed

Confusion is rife , fear is real, I am isolated, I feel hopeless, I cry, I am lonely, help me please!

Governments struggle to lead, irrational people are not interested in helping their fellow mankind, making this hard slog, so much harder to bear, I am isolated, I feel hopeless, I cry, I am lonely, help me please!

NHS and the front line workers have become our true shining lights, their dedication, and loyalty showing the way, giving us the strength to carry on, I am isolated, I feel hopeless, I cry, I am lonely, help me please!

The lights are slowly, but surely burning brighter, the genius of the scientist's have finally made the breakthrough

Yes, sadly too late for many, our thoughts for their families are inflamed with their sadness, and misery.

, the future offers a strand of hope for us all, hanging by a thread, momentarily just out of reach, I am isolated, I feel hopeless, I cry, I am lonely, help me please!

Let's not waste this opportunity we have been given, people have sacrificed so much , yes, too much, death is real!

Let 2021 be our final saviour, let's pray that it is, I am old, I am isolated, I feel hopeless, I am lonely, I am so lonely, I cry, help me please!, help me please!

Forever in Lockdown - S Higgins

While hiking high up in the hills near home
I drift to a dream of a different day;
A pint with pork pie in the pub, not alone,
Meandering walks in wondrous worlds far away.
Sauvignon blanc on a blustery beach,
Long lazy lunches taken at leisure,
Freshly foraged fruit favourite fare for a feast;
A day when we're not locked down, but together.
Then my thoughts turn to now, and the life I live in,
Remembering love's not all lost, and nor is to laugh.
And later, sweet scented soap will be like silk on my skin
Where bountiful bubbles are a mountain in my bath.
The grass the lambs graze will forever grow green
And today there is no other place I would rather have been.

Isolation - A Cunningham

Sealed,closed, the bud clenches its fist.
Snow coats trees' branches, frozen kissed.
Ice rimes frozen water troughs
Cracks under foot.

Facing in, grey houses frill a Square.
This Peakland village once was crowded there.
A market,.Laughter,shouts and noise.
Tapestry of sounds.

Now ringing silence folds around
grey stone, black ice on hardened ground.
A lighted window shines,
beacon in the cold.

Friendship lives behind ancient walls.
' You all right then?' a neighbour calls,
but distanced by strict social laws
doors shut for night.

Shackled in loneliness we sleep
Muzzled by Covid ,nightmares deep.
Keep away the slaving virus!
Keep away! Keep away!

Dreaming we fly to where skies are blue
Where our loves are waiting. Life starts anew.
A world of beauty, soaring and free.
Such a fragile world!

10 days of Isolation - R Slack

Day 1 - I think this might be fun!

Day 2 - I feel like I'm in a Zoo!

Day 3 - Will I ever be free!

Day 4 - I long to go out of the door!

Day 5 - I wish I could go for a drive!

Day 6 - More cakes I mix!

Day 7 - This is not my idea of heaven!

Day 8 - I just wait and wait and wait

Day 9 - I think I'll do my shopping online!

Day 10 - The Isolation comes to an end - but
I still can't visit a friend!

Isolation Education - C Brewer

Found when no-one's around – inwardly screaming, but no hint of a sound

This enforced isolation - a social cessation

How much more can we bear, with our loved ones not there

A lonely war that we wage, but if we dissect every age

Exposing community ravaged – subtle, shameless, savage

A sadly plentiful find – a disconnect of mankind

Loneliness – segregation, an impaired insular nation

Abusers, disability, absent civil liberty

The homeless, displaced, those restricted by race

Disproportionate wealth, crushed mental health

Many live this reality, separate from 'normality'

Divorced from society - dragged down by fear and anxiety

Far from peaceful and calm, held back by hatred and harm

Isolations' harsh tool, created callously, cruel

But there could be a solution to this solitary pollution

Let this virus legacy be - a world kinder and free

Of the barriers caused, by humanity, paused

And use this as a start - to reach out from our heart

What better sensation – than our eyes elation

Seeds of knowledge well planted, not taken for granted

That there's nothing on Earth could ever truly be worth

Losing sight of what's right, to use our love to unite

Emerge wiser, and hoping, keeping eyes and minds open

For our futures we must, in each other entrust

Show our loved ones we care, spread that warmth everywhere

A welcome infection, of human connection

Might be just what we need for life on Earth to succeed.

A Muted Life - A Stone

One minute everything was normal. Then everything stopped.
A pandemic was here, my employer called me to say I'd been dropped.

It was all so abrupt, so heartless and uncaring.
Apparently, I was surplus. They would be doing no labour sparing.

It was all so confusing and I felt so very alone.
I didn't even have any pets to share my tears or hear my groans.

Every day feels like a lifetime of silence. Trapped inside with nowhere to go.
I never considered I would be in this position and I could feel this incredibly low.

The dark nights and cold weather have made life even more depressing.
Who thought a few months ago we'd consider simple fresh air such a blessing.

The TV is a constant source of negativity, I cannot stand to listen to the repeated drawl.
My phone lies silent. Even the Job Centre now no longer bothers to call.

There's of course the radio, internet and odd video call to give a little distraction.
But it's still not enough to overshadow the isolation, the lack of personal interaction.

Whoever thought a supermarket would be our only contact with local citizens.
Some of it sadly not always positive with the lack of disrespect I am witnessing.

I have to live in hope that the world will become a better place.
That one day in the future there will be jobs and we will be able to again show our face.

It will feel like the world has finally come out of hibernation.
I'm just not sure how I will be ready to face that long-awaited situation.

The changes I have experienced have made my life feel totally crushed.
It will take some time to learn to re-build life, adapt and adjust.

I can't help but feel there will be a huge sense of relief.
But please, when can I finally escape from this dark Covid thief?

Isolation - H Carter

Have you ever found yourself with a pocket of time - no, a huge fat parcel of it - wondering what to do with the endless possibilities?

May 2020. National lockdown in the midst of a global pandemic. One of the lucky ones - still in paid employment, able to work from home. And a huge parcel of time, like an unexpected present I was delighted to receive. What to do? Ebay mounds of unwanted stuff after a big clear out. Quids in! Gardening...dig over the strawberry patch, dig up the wonky path, dig out the badminton set. Decorating...an extra coat on that patchy skirting, indigo walls over the pink of a tweenager's bedroom. Children...time to spend together, out walking and camping in the garden, time to LISTEN to them. Time to enjoy before the inevitable emptiness of a flown nest.

And bike rides. The roads are eerily quiet, like the aftermath of a zombie apocalypse. The sun is shining, we pedal our bikes round winding Whitwell roads, up past the old Co-op and out across bright canary fields of rape near Doles Lane. I pray my Cetirizine holds out. We bike across the A619, deserted except for a solitary truck. A narrow bumpy path flanked by high hedges and trees down to Netherthorpe - I pull in my exposed calves close to the crossbar, mean nettles are desperate for a caress I won't forget in a hurry. Turnerwood is tranquil and huge sombre fish patrol the cool clear waters - they remember the carnage of the swans and mallards only a few nights ago.

Zippering along the Cuckoo Trail of the Chesterfield Canal, the air is warm and the birds are singing. Mother Nature reminds us that SHE is the boss. Kiveton and then Killamarsh with a quick stop in between at Rother Valley for continental ham, cheese and olives - an EU smorgasbord. Huffing and puffing on the Transpennine Trail - need a rest - huffing and puffing - need a rest. Poolsbrook and then the Clowne Branch Line Greenway - a huge sign reminds us that EU money paid for this magnificent walkers and cyclists' artery, away from the dangers of motor vehicles (but in sight of the subdued M1 and a huge becalmed transport hub).

I see odd other cyclists (at a distance) struggling with the modest ascent - not just me then. Uphill to Barlborough, to Clowne, past Clowne - relentless. I picture the old freight trains dragging coal up and down this way (now they are only ghosts). Suddenly we are on the downhill though, freewheeling towards Creswell past magnesian limestone crags clothed with hart's tongue fern and knotted with ancient gnarls of ivy. Great tits sing, 'Teacher, teacher!' and even the odd bejewelled bullfinch is dotted in trees above. Then swinging off northwards, back into Whitwell past Peter More and along the quarry footpath. Clapping the NHS after Thursday teatime.

Isolation. Marooned with loved ones, unpacking and devouring that fat parcel of time greedily.

On Reflection - D Slack

Squinting to get a closer look through the bevelled glass he moved a little nearer to the window. He could see honeysuckle and vines' creeping up the walls, a rich moss green covering the floor, logs stacked neatly in symmetrical piles. A small fire burned slowly, whispers of smoke waving goodbye to dancing flames.

He turned sharply; someone was standing behind him. He could see the reflection in the glass. "No, go away, leave me, I'm an old man, I have nothing." The cold words echoed in his head, realising it was his own reflection that had frightened him. He changed stance just to make sure, it was so long since he had seen his own image. "It's me, Peter." He whispered.

Leaning forward, he reached out to steady himself, grasping the weather-worn windowsill, his head spinning. "Is my name Peter? Yes of course it is."

It seemed like an eternity since anyone had used his name, or had any contact with him at all, not even to abuse him, he was just ignored by the world around him. His faded blue eyes saw yet gave no reaction to the people who crossed the road or found something interesting in a shop window to avoid contact. Finding a private space, he'd chant quietly to himself over and over, "Does this wrinkled skin and graying hair make me invisible?"

Turning back to the window he saw the room as it had been when he'd lived there, recalling the floors before the moss green carpet, before the vines and honeysuckle wallpaper had been wrapped around the chimney breast.

Was it bad luck? One wrong decision or a lifetime of wrong decisions. "Bah." Peter shrugged off thoughts that didn't change anything. He didn't believe in luck, good or bad, didn't see the point. Regrets were for other people, all there really is, is the here and now – the next breath, the next footstep. He would never again be that happy young lad inside that house dancing like no one was watching, listening to musicians who'd long since passed. Music, yes, he could remember the joy of music, he started humming a tune, but he couldn't remember what it was or who had sung it. Perhaps, just perhaps if he could feel a beat or hear a melody from those happy days, it might just give him something tangible to hold onto.

Looking up he could see ominous storm clouds hovering, he would soon need to find somewhere safe for the night. The fire looked so inviting, the flames licked the chimney, sparks danced on the hearth as if in motion with the ever-changing lights of the fire behind them. Peter shivered, pulling the rope tighter around his ill-fitting sports jacket. He wanted to go. The pain of happy memories flooding in like a dangerous tide. But something held him there, some cruel obsession of what had been, but was no more.

A lament for Sarah - J Copson

The noise of this and that barely registers

It's there of course but I am in a different place with my own sounds

Thoughts and memories come and go and the hum drum minutiae of life exist in some barely tangible real world.

The careers and keepers tend to that world that I must acknowledge when my body and mind are able to return from the darkness.

Will it be tomorrow. It will not be tomorrow.

Will it be soon. It may be soon.

But not now.

Am I selfish to share my sorrow only with that dearest spirit so tragically lost, to find greater comfort in those unheard words and treasured images than in any mortal comforting.

Let me tarry a while with my memories, please. Do not coax me from my dreaming, I will wake presently.

There will be no new memories and those so poignant for me now will surely fade. My life, so much poorer for its loss, must move on.

But not now.

Let me stay awhile as I am and I will come back to you when I can bear to leave my grief behind. It is too painful now and the tears too many and often.

I will return.

But not now.

Poem for the Lockdown - D Finlayson

No need for more
Community is all, nothing else from me
No need for pets
No need for gods
No need to bet against the odds
No need for aliens
No need for spirits, except malts
No need for heroes
No need for saints
No need for ghosts under the bed

All I need is you and me
Sitting outside under a tree
Sharing a drink at the local pub
Doing local arts in a local hub
Life is simple, but it's more than enough
No need for more the other stuff

Alternative Christmas Card 2020 - J Chappell

What a strange year 2020 has been
Everywhere you go masks can be seen.
At first the changes were such a shock
And it was very stressful to go to the shops,
I'd stand in a queue of upto twenty
Only to find the shelves were empty.

To exercise we had an hour a day
The rest of the time AT HOME WE MUST STAY!
Many learned new skills and crafts
To help make the long days pass.
Online people went for gym clubs and meetings,
And to pass and share friend and family greetings.

On Thursday we'd say, "NHS Are Great! "
By clapping in streets in the evening at eight.
We'd see our neighbours and have a chat,
But - FROM A DISTANCE !! Don't forget that !
As they were, things will never be,
This year will go down in World History.

Many shops are closed, making it hard
To go and buy you a Christmas Card,
So as an alternative I've written this poem,
To send "Festive Joy" to your home.
A Merry Christmas to Everyone
And hopes for a better 2021.

THE LONELINESS OF NOW (Short Listed) - B Millward

“I just had to speak to somebody,” she said. “I think I’ll go mad just sitting here on my own all day staring at that bloody screen. Really, have you ever tried to watch daytime television?”

Oh yes, I’ve watched a lot of daytime television.

“So I thought I’d just give you a ring, see how you are.”

But you never rang me before. And you still have not asked how we are.
“I don’t suppose you find this lockdown much different. I mean, you did not go out much before. Not with, you know...”

No I did not go out much, but people came in. Neighbours. A bit of shopping, a few freshly-baked scones. Welcome, but not as welcome as talk, gossip, the pandemic, anything, just talk. And now they don’t come. The shopping and the scones are left on the doorstep and we wave to each other.

“I feel so isolated, being on my own.”

You don’t need to be alone to be isolated.

“How long has it been now, this lockdown? Three weeks. Three weeks! It feels like three years.”

How does she think three years feels like.

“And when is it going to end? They say they’ll review it next month but I think that’s just to keep us going. I reckon it will be more like Easter. What do you think?”

What do I think? I try not to think.

“I can’t imagine what it will be like when it’s all over.”

I can. I do. Lots of times, some in the middle of the day when the sun shines, some in the middle of the night when it seems the sun will never shine again.

“At least we can get out for a walk. That’s something.”

That would be something. If it was not for his panic when I make for the door.

“Somebody was asking me the other day how old George is.”

I tell her sixty.

“Sixty. It’s very young isn’t it, you know, for that.”

Yes I do know.

“How is he? In himself?”

He’s fine, I say. I don’t say he isn’t in himself. That he isn’t himself. That he will never be himself again.

“Shall I have a word with him?”

He’s asleep I tell her.

“Well remember me to him.”

Remember you to him when most days he can’t remember who I am!

“I’d better be going now. Nice to speak to you. A pity we can’t get together. This Covid’s got a lot to answer for.”

Covid only makes worse what was already there, it doesn’t alter the facts. The days and hours were just as long before, as they will be again when Covid is a memory. Days and hours that have no history and no future, that are only now. And now is a lonely place.

Who's turn is it to make the tea? - D Harvey

Waking, alone
Wondering, alone
Who's turn is it today to make the tea?
Oh, I remember, there is only me.

Walking, alone
Thinking, alone
Sights to share, of nature's wonders, fleeting glee
Then I realise, there is only me to see.

Home again, no welcome sounds
No face at the window waiting for me
The door is locked, even the clock has stopped
Further to remind, there is only me.

What next, I ask myself
How can I get through this day?
Missing, grieving, longing
Find a way, I must find a way.

Keeping busy, all the time
With hands, but also mind
Trying so hard, to make sense of life, to smile and still care
So difficult when someone loved is no longer there.

Suddenly, a song stops me in my tracks
Such precious memories, stinging tears are back
Feel the emotions, take time to relive then sigh
I remember being told; it is good to cry.
Evening now, so tiredness too
Wondering how I made it through,
Yet another day
Without the warmth of your arms, no love or laughter between us, nothing to say.

A friendly voice or a face at last
So welcome, though must beware what I say
Don't clutter with tears and sadness
But be reminded that love and friendship is not too far away.

And so to sleep, if I can, let's see
Mind still busy, thinking, wondering
Who's turn will it be to make the tea?
Oh I remember, again, it will be me.

My Resilience - D Child

I retired the end of December last year
Hoping for a future devoid of any fear
My daughter then departed to live in her own home
Leaving me in my abode residing all alone

I've never lived alone before
So wasn't aware of what was in store
I was just getting going, creating a new scene
When the world was struck down with Covid 19

In my entire life I've never felt so alone
Even with people at the end of a phone
I searched my soul for how I would survive
And I've come through it and I'm very much alive

I kept myself busy during the long days
Doing different things, whatever the latest craze
I took some online courses, most of which were free
To find I've rediscovered my love for poetry

Outside In - D Duncombe

Out of your sight the blossom turned silk
in sunlight and willows cascaded green.
You stayed in, warned of the danger last spring,

The willows wept through summer too,
though nature had been re-arranged for you,
to appear encased on a screen, followed
by Big Brother slogans hard to keep
at a distance and brave, kind images
of people we couldn't reach or touch
despite the framed smiles and the sad eyes
and the all-together messages
and the knees-up; cheer-up songs and dances.
Regrets? Not your scene? You switched off.

You opened your windows to birdsong
and the breeze - yes, yes, I know about those
bricked and sealed and soundproofed inside
and all those isolated in confusion
even in gardens or peopled rooms.

Autumn escaped you, while winter suits
your mood, the season to look forward,
the sick year's end, with the world turning
in its usual promise, before flood,
fire, more disease and choking air,
disturb our swelling, dying species.

Some will pray and hope and care.
Some will care and pay and feel despair.

Obey orders, foot-soldiers were told
as bullets whined on the front line.
Let's hope this time the generals have a plan
of attack that won't march you back to
solitude
to wither the blossom in your thoughts
to brown the willow and silence the birds.

For The Voice That Makes A Difference - A Slater

The city crumbled around me, structures falling like boulders in the midnight blue sky. There were screams of desperation from the gathering of a bereft crowd. Smells wafted around me, unfamiliar, yet bringing faded memories to the forefront of my vision, making my eyes water from the emotions they evoked. Something picked at my brain, needling its way in like a burrowing termite trying to reach the surface; the white noise of silence becoming deafening with every second that passed...

I lay so still, trying to erase the colliding sensations, taking deep breaths as I had been shown by the caring circle around me. I tried so frantically to calm my erratic thoughts and feelings. We had been in lockdown for nine weeks now. I say lockdown, but every other member of my household was away at work... they went out and risked themselves for the betterment of our unit and of the world. I had received notice I would need to stay at home, a rare disorder keeping me from the very thing that kept my mental health in check. Going to work is what kept me from my inner demons, kept me from losing myself in a minefield of anxiety. Living in my own brain has never been something I've been fond of. I've always been known as an overthinker and as time creeps on, the voices of those creatures grow ever louder. Paranoia that something dreadful might happen to the ones I love. Self loathing pricks at every nerve ending I possess and pulls me into a whirlwind of depression. This world will be one that is better off without me. I close my eyes and ready myself for what I know should come next.

A shrilling noise jolts me from my thoughts; a buzzing that touches my inner core. I grapple around me, trying to find the cause. My fingertips brush against the cold plastic and I pick up the device. Tears fill my eyes as I see a name flash up on the screen. The letters blur together as I blink away tears combined of relief and despair. I zone in on the options in front of me. The red button will quieten the device and I can go back to laying here awash with the sensations threatening to overcome me. The green button means I will have to speak. Something I haven't done properly for several weeks. Something I am almost afraid of doing, in case everything that has grown inside my head comes tumbling out, compromising the power to stop.

My finger encounters the screen and with a heavy hand, I bring the tool up to my ear. I wait impatiently for something from the other side. I know my once, upbeat, cheery voice will come out gravelly and gruff.

And then I hear it... just four words that transmit everything I've been thinking safely behind a locked door. Four simple words "I love you mum."

The Magic Smile - R Jozefczyk

Her feet collapsed, knees sorely shattered,
Only her hopes and dreams lost. Battered.
Nervousness, an over filled party balloon ready to implode.
Yet she smiles.
The magic fills up the room - all you see is the disguise.
Mock happiness, joy, no fear and strength.
A dignified Queen keeps her castle no matter what length.
Sun melts away, all turns to dusk, the smile fades, the tears start to fall.
All is a lonely dismay.
Curtains closed to the mountainous struggle she faces,
the pain that she feels, as her body is filled with stone and with clay.
She cannot let you see this, as it's her pain to feel.
No table for two, no two glasses of wine to pour. Solitude.
Her mask of fulfilment covers what's hers - so crumbled and sad.
She does not want this for you, it's her torture to bare,
screams through the night, the dreams turn her mad.
Her back is broken, her shoulders are ripped, her fingers are crippled, and her hips are
torn,
her stomach has exploded, her veins have erupted - the misery it has worn.
But you won't know. All is concealed.
Rosy tinted lips, flushing cheeks and blue blushed eyes.
She has a magic smile.
Lazy, lazy, as she hides away the days saying she is sick and the light burns her eyes,
you could do better... you think it's all lies!
You don't know the name of her curse that has no cure, you have not asked? or wanted to
dare?
Her magic smile makes it all better, but only for your world.
Every day on a loop.
Smile, cry, smile, cry, smile, cry.
Her disguise, her lies, her desolate demise.
Good Morning,

Untitled - J Robson

And then it truly begins. The people start dying. My dad holes himself into his two bedroomed semi, my mum does the same in her flat. I am lonelier than lonely. It started in China, actually in a place I have been and bought socks. I went there for a wedding, Johnson and Bella's actually, with Pete. Maybe we did something while we were there to start it. In Hu'an, coronavirus. And it spread and all of the people are dying and we have tiers and lockdowns and yet still it spreads. On clothes, on cards, in passing, through a breath. In April while I was in hospital two hundred and fifty people died in Derbyshire alone. And afterwards many more. The hospitals are full, the shops are all closed, red and white tape closes paths and walkways. We are getting used to the sirens, ambulances, the police, fire engines. The buses run.

My dad is watching the news twenty-four seven. Caronavirus the sequel to Brexit, to be followed by ... I am worried that he knows no more than I do 'We are no longer in Europe, Stay at home.' My mum is on a diet but her teeth are falling out and she has coldsores, so the overall effect is not as desirable as one may hope. She still loves dad, death has a way of doing that. Digging up love. Darren has a new girlfriend, a nurse. I don't ask though I'm certain it will be mental health. They are trying to make us believe we need them. She has two sons, they are a family and have a family Christmas. I feel ill without being pregnant. I go every month to be drugged. Though they've stopped now with the poison, I'm sure they have. I know this because I don't feel poisoned. They pretend to inject me, for appearances sake, and the sake of cake. A little drama. I am in despair. I meet in Covid friendly condition with the doctor and two social workers and they tell me I am under another community treatment order. It's not about me and my health and happiness, but them and Darren and Jane and I go home, where I celebrate Christmas alone. Then New Year. What makes me worth so little? I cry every night but don't tell anyone – their answer is always drugs. Not so much at the moment, I've stopped a little. I still email Darren sometimes and sent one text. He doesn't respond.

I'm going to go to New Zealand to live with my sister's family. They have shut their borders, but I might steal a canoe. I cry again and it is coronavirus and not a person or a plan. It is o.k. they do not hate me. They are not laughing ... Please tell me they didn't want this for me. I go to bed again alone, having spent the day alone, with no-one calling or emailing or answering my calls.

Choices - D Botham

Cold, frosty morning; warm soft duvet.
Do I stay cosy,
or must I now get up, break bird bath ice,
And share my muesli with the sparrows?

Worldwide crisis; media frenzy.
Do I watch T.V. news a third time round,
Or go and make a batch of scones?

Isolation; time hangs heavy.
Should I bemoan where I can't go
Or start those things I never had the time for?

Frown or smile?
Give or take?
Battle on or just give up?
Curse the dark or light that bless
Blessed candle?

Fret not. There wasn't any need to choose at all.
Those agonies of indecision have a cure.
A still, small voice that urges
Right choice!
Wrong choice!

Freewill is just a gift that's best not kept
But gratefully surrendered back to Him who gave it.

For you - L Bagley

A poem for Sean

I see you in my thoughts and dreams,
When I awake, how real it all seems.
I can't reach out and hold you close,
Even when I need you the most.
You aren't here to comfort me,
But soon I hope you will be.
Time apart trickles like sand,
Wishing I could just hold your hand.

No one truly knows or understands;
That you have my heart in your hands.
My love is what you truly own,
Come back soon to make a house, a home.

Inside house walls you are doing your time,
Not being here with me is your only true crime,
Yet rules and laws define us now,
Alone we find ourselves wondering how.
Others in your life will come and go,
Households allowed didn't you know.

I may not live close or be able to with you run,
But I love you so much; you are my sun.
You light up my life every time you call.
When our time is up, I begin to fall.
You are my stars, my moon,
Being with you will come very soon.
So with each passing day, take this to heart,
No one or nothing will keep us apart.

No longer the “ happy to chat bench” - T Fisher

Happy to slap a fine bench
Don't sit here
Not for one second!
Or the sirens will scream
Descending by decree
No matter if you are weary
Or alone
Do not smile or laugh
In the park
God forgive you
If you sup a liquid
Hot or cold
Its now a crime
Do not enjoy
Your exercises
Don't be **bold**
Do as you are
Told ...
And go home quick
Turn your cheeks
But not on *this* bench !
For this is
Covid Britain
The virus
That came in from
The cold

NO ISOLATION, UNTIL... - R Lowe

From the moment of conception
There is no isolation:
In the amniotic fluid
The future person floats,
Immaculate and perfect,
Integral to the being
Of the shielding mother host.

Then, at the birth, there is communication:
The howling child, the woman who forgets
The pains of labour in the living gaze
Of boy or girl, but always human being.

Next, come the years of learning from each other,
And others in a universe expanding
To family, to friends, to school, and then beyond –
At the same time, trying to understand
The inward self accompanying the journey.

That is the mystery. That is the loneliest spot.
But even there, there is no isolation:
Only a burden, though a joyous one.
Some call it consciousness, others say God,
Psychologists might explore it through a Rorschach blot.

The awareness of oneself as travelling on.

So, onward, ever onward, in the journey we call living,
Through cities, fieldscapes, forests in the complex human being –
Have you heard collective singing? You will hear submissive howling –
Till, at last, the roadway's features thin,
With fewer passers-by, and fewer houses shared;
Perhaps an isolated Inn. Yet there remains the sky.

As the track, no longer asphalt, moves through a sheltered stretch
Of gravel or loose stone, where the walkers' footsteps slip
And a sign proclaims "No Entry" except you are alone;

The horizon, dark and nearer, reminds you of your birth,
When sheltered by your mother in the larger womb of earth
You stood at the beginning of decades now long gone past.

How did you come so far? And where are your companions now?

We all fear isolation. But what is that?
Up ahead a figure looms, becoming clearer in the gloom –
Bearded. old. A glowing cane
Guides his descending from the stars.
His voice is gentle, and his refrain
Is: “Come, child, you were always alone
For no-one ever understands another.
Instead you love, thus conquer isolation.
I am your last companion. Come!”

I was not expecting that - A Hughes

Christmas 2019 and mum is in hospital, I was not expecting that.

Happy new year and here comes Covid, I was not expecting that.

It is now March and we are in lockdown, I was not expecting that

Online shopping cannot be done, I was not expecting that

We are in June and things are still no better, I was not expecting that.

Here comes Christmas and mum is much better. I was expecting that.

...and this is what it is like or what it is like in words.* - C Taylor

'Stand up straight. Put your shoulders back – and don't slouch'. Grandmother smelt of something faintly unpleasant, even threatening. Didn't grandmothers in books smell of lavender, and boiled sweets? The room was dark, oppressive. A bee buzzed at the window, trying to find an escape. It's slow, sleepy, nuzzling at the glass was all for nothing – the windows wouldn't be opened. The long green velvet curtains were rarely drawn, just shaken once a week, when the dust flew around and settled back into the same folds and creases. She slid her eyes sideways and glimpsed the picture on the wall – grandfather William supposedly, who built the factory, set this family up, died and left Grandmother a long while ago. No wonder, she thought. His long nose, and sharp little beard, so much like her father's; that haughty look too.

'What have you been doing? Don't try and lie to me, I know your ways. Deceitful and lazy, you always have been. What have you been doing, skulking about in your room? I've heard you.'

The heavy velvet curtains smelt of damp, and in the dim light the brass ornaments shone, polished, dull. Grandmother's body creaked as she drew herself up in the chair, her long black gown rustling. She spat out:

'Your mother's daughter that's what you are. Flibbertigibbet. She doesn't want you, now she is with her precious Frank, living like the muck she is. Left you behind like she left your father. And he doesn't want you – why would he? There's nothing about you he could possibly want.'

Her words whirled around the room; they had all been said before. They bounced off her, and spun away into the cornices, joining all the other things she had been called over the last year. They scarcely registered any more. 'Sullen'. 'Ungrateful'. 'Lazy'. 'Stupid'.

Her grandmother kept on spitting words at her, but she had already gone inside herself, carefully constructing the shield that she always built up; protecting herself from this bitter, twisted, vile woman, who had taken her in when no one else wanted her, and never shown her the slightest bit of affection. Just foul words and, yes, hate. In her mind she sank down, deep inside herself, deflecting the insults, building a wall, a core of what she really was. She wasn't stupid, or lazy; she tried not to be ungrateful but this incessant litany of her faults made that hard.

She went where she always went in her mind – freedom, friends, life. People around you just getting in with their lives. She repeated the litany: 'One day this will all be over.' 'One day you will leave.'

Her Grandmother's final words dragged her back: 'Go to your room and stay there.'

As she passed the heavy front door, bolted and curtained, she heard the sound of a tram passing, voices of families slowly fading as she slowly climbed the stairs.

Wishing Them Here - D Wood

He reached out and stopped the alarm clock's shrill beeping,
then glanced at the spot where his wife should be sleeping.

He throws back the covers, and struggles at standing,
puts on his slippers, shuffles to the landing.

Ever so carefully, the steps he came down,
knowing downstairs there'd be no one around.
Turns on the radio, makes toast, spreads the butter,
praying the postman will bring him a letter.

Tea in hand, at the photo he'd glance,
of his boy, his wife, and his grand-kids in France.
Glad that they're happy, the ones he holds dear,
feeling so lonely, wishing them here.

Breakfast all done, he washes the dishes,
fusses the cat, and feeds his gold fishes.
Back upstairs, showered, dressed, and teeth clean,
the comforting rhythm of his well worn routine.
Off to the park, with his stick and face covering,
feeding his friends, the squirrels and the ducklings.
Soon feeling cold, so it's home to his kettle,
stokes up the fire, in his arm chair he settles.

Tea in hand, at the photo he'd glance,
of his boy, his wife, and his grand-kids in France.
Glad that they're happy, the ones he holds dear,
feeling so lonely, wishing them here.

Boiled egg for lunch, and then kippers for tea,
brief interludes from watching TV.
The evening wears on, the clock soon strikes seven,
Charlie's thoughts drift off, to his wife up in heaven.
Remembering her smile, his true one and only,
the life that they shared, before he was lonely.
He makes one more cuppa, to drink by himself,
then shambles slowly over, to stand by his shelf.

Tea in hand, at the photo he'd glance,
of his boy, his wife, and his grand-kids in France.
Glad that they're happy, the ones he holds dear,
feeling so lonely, wishing them here.

My Daughter's Face - E Mills-Wallace

My daughter's face is perfect.
My eyes are red and puffy.
Crying, again.
The latch looks great they say, so it has got to be tongue tie.
Can't get it snipped as the staff are redeployed. More important work.
I go back to biting my hand to stifle the screams every time she feeds at 2am, so as not to wake my husband.

My daughter's face has hardly been seen.
Just me, Daddy, live-in Nanny and Grandad.
A few have zoomed, too,
Waving at her while she looks back, intrigued. No different to her than characters on TV.
But most are just too busy. Job hunting, homeschooling or simply dealing with daily mental battles.

My daughter's face has never seen another baby.
Maternity leave is cancelled.
No coffee and chats in cafés with crying babes cradled in car seats.
No sensory sessions in school halls with sympathy from other sleep-deprived souls.
No massage class in Matlock with new Mummy friends moaning about monotony.

My daughter's face was smiling at her Grandad.
We show the paramedics the photo.
Our first visitors for months.
They did their best but his heart just failed,
One month before the vaccine.
The last year spent shielding. Hiding.
From disease. From people. From life.

My daughter's face is why I bother to wake up.
It is the promise of hope and a future.
Filled with hugs, parties, restaurants, trips to the zoo, holidays; normality.
One day, when she's older, she'll ask me about the year she was born.
She'll laugh about the fact that people fought over loo roll. That they stood in doorways,
clapping for people who couldn't hear it.
That I was afraid to step out through the front door.

Isolation (Shortlisted)- S Kempsey

Raindrop tears weave their way down the misted window, many merging, countless others isolated as they bounce off the cracked paint of the worn sill. Sometimes a sudden wind blows them off course, creating abstract wet patterns on the glass.

I watch and wait. It's one of those days with hardly any brightness to ease the deep loneliness. Not even joggers or dog walkers venture out onto the slippery pavement today.

It's the driving rain, you see: it has its own stay at home message.

Murky dull weather makes it harder to estimate Nico's arrival which I routinely like to predict. It's always after the elderly gentleman fetches his daily paper but before the children race hungrily home for tea. But schools are closed, streets are deserted.

There is no laughter or shouting from lively children; no reassuring sounds of normality.

The long light days and sweet birdsong made the early weeks of seclusion more bearable.

The warmth of the intense spring sunshine reached in through the glass and hugged my bones, so I felt less impatient for him.

I try to snooze, the tapping rain not quite a lullaby.

I recall the first day we were introduced. We were awkward with each other. I suppose some would say I was belligerent and acted like a stubborn child.

He was endlessly patient; he was still learning and received brusque instructions from his colleague not to waste time chatting.

We blended together over the summer reaching a warm understanding; even a friendship as unexpected as it was welcome.

I hear the door. I turn my head.

He bounds across to me in his bubbly exuberant style. The emptiness of four bleak walls temporarily relieved; it feels cosier and warmer.

A voice.

Face behind a mask.

Rainbow of hope.

Nico greets me cheerfully and quite loudly, even though my hearing is still perfect. He hasn't noticed that.

This visit invites my buried daydream.

Memories of a life well lived.

For the briefest of moments, I forget solitude.

Friends shared afternoon tea or sipped sangria in the golden Mediterranean sun.
Oh how we loved to dance into the early hours with no concerns for the future.
Our sun-bleached hair flowing, carefree times we thought would last for ever.
Now each empty lonely night these treasured images mournfully taunt me, while I weep.

He doesn't know any of this, of course.

He performs his caring duties professionally and respectfully.
I enjoy listening to his voice as he carefully, but hurriedly records his visit in my book.

“How have you been darlin’? “

“Take these tablets”

“Ooh listen to that rain”

A glance at his watch, a cheery “bye, love “ then depressingly he’s gone.
I watch him turn the corner, head down, collar up against the downpour.

Alone, unstoppable dark thoughts return, the walls cave in and gloom surrounds me.
Almost 24 hours until I see a face again.

In this Pandemic, however long it lasts, he is my link to the world.

Isolation - C Taylor

Your courage and valour astound me,
The familiar ring, breaks the silence,
I pick up and hear your smile.....
Your news, your views,
Each day, you help us all to cope and to hope.

The days move on, our confidence and sureness wane, I pick up and hear your smile.....
You, reassure and speak of the past.
When things were seemingly worse,
Your confidence in the future, spur us on.

We busy ourselves: working, painting, gardening, I pick up and hear your smile.....
I am sad about your loneliness, your lack of company and support, Cheated of a time to
grieve, surrounded by your loving family, Each day you speak to one of us – your positivity,
soldiers on.

We walk and talk and listen to music,
I pick up and hear your smile.....
You share stories of your new friends – Alexa and strangers on the TV, You tell me of your
latest recipe – secret ingredients and healthy foods to soothe the soul, You inspire us and
challenge us to always look for the good.

I think about you and worry that you're ok, I pick up and hear your smile.....
We share stories and hopes and feel each other's pain, The pandemic is persistent, and its
contagion affects us all, You speak of its' similarity to the flu virus and our ability to live
with it.

The winter days are long, and our patience is tested.....
I pick up and hear your smile.
You share a joke or a story you've heard amongst the family, You admit to feeling lonely
and to be struggling with the relentless situation, We comfort each other, ISOLATION
taking its' toll.

I'm saddened, trying to think how I can help?
I pick up and hear your smile.....
You talk of the future and this lightens my soul, You speak of happy times and the joy
you've known, Your memories are golden and magical and full of love.

The birds sing and the hours of daylight increase, I pick up and hear your smile.....
Your blues are bright blues and give way to the light, Your thoughts are of others and the

'written word' delights, You've dedicated yourself to this period of isolation and embraced the challenge – the end, my dearest Father is in sight.

An t-Oileán Uaigneach [The Lonely Isle] - P Kendall

The pounding of waves against the cliff-foot sounded constantly in Ishbel's head. She couldn't escape them on this rough Hebridean outcrop, Oilean Uaigneach, - The Lonely Isle. Cast ashore with meagre provisions, to survive or perish. Punishment indeed! Maybe she would be recovered at some future date. And then what? To live as an outcast, exiled from her family, isolated, with no company but her own.

And what was her crime? Being in love! Is anyone in such control of their emotions that they can live, cheek by jowl with another being and not respond when tenderness, warmth, passion and physical intimacy are offered? In their hot-house clan settlement with its feudal leadership, the women forged tight bonds anyway. They seldom strayed beyond their own valley, almost all their needs met by self-sufficiency. Clan McRae had dwelt and thrived in the shadow of Ben Cailleach as far back as memory could go. The men might gather together and be absent for days on the business of inter-tribal feuding, but the women folk led settled, domestic lives in their tight-knit community, dependent on one another for food production, for textiles, for educating the children, for companionship.

But Ishbel had transgressed; she had broken Clan Law. She had violated age-old taboo. Ishbel had fallen in love with the Clan Chief's wife. The two were of similar age. Mairi had no children; Ishbel had two under fives: Kirstie and Craig. They were a handful and Mairi often helped her, clearly enjoying vicarious motherhood and their happy relationship. Ishbel was grateful of the help and the company. Stewart, her man, was a poor father and even worse lover. It was a marvel she had conceived twice and it would be a miracle if she ever conceived again! So it was little wonder that she and Mairi had become closer and closer and, with so much opportunity, lovers.

Until that night when the men had unexpectedly returned from warring with a neighbouring clan. They were half drunk and Mairi and Ishbel had no time to provide a convincing cover-up when Stewart burst in. Ishbel was dragged screaming away from her children. She was kept captive overnight and next morning thrust before the Clan Chief who acted as judge as well as prosecution and condemned her to exile. Dragged to a boat with a few belongings, she was set ashore on Oilean Uaigneach for indeterminate isolation. What they did with Mairi she had no idea.

How long ago was that?Days?Weeks? What would happen when she ran out of her supply of eggs from the nesting seabirds- or their breeding season was over? How long would the pitiful supply of oatmeal last out? Had they given her that to keep her alive or was it a further way of punishing her by prolonging the inevitable.

The inevitable....Yes. With brave determination and with Kirstie and Craig before her, Ishbel welcomed the relentless pounding of the waves at the foot of the cliffs of Oilean Uaigneach.

I am in Solitude - L Morris

Solitude looks like my house but the rooms are smaller.

Nobody comes in but the telephone rings. I don't like the telephone. It promises company but under-delivers. Just a voice with nothing left to say, no shared experience.

The parcel-man is better - he delivers. He knocks on the door and waves to me from the end of the path.

"Thank you!" I shout gaily and listen for the reply.

"Are you doing OK Mrs..." he shouts back and sometimes he has time to wait for my reply.

"Yes. I'm fine!" I call. "Take care!" And he turns and goes on his busy way.

I love getting parcels. I've had slippers, a measuring jug, drawing pens, vitamins and some "Made in England" cake tins amongst other things and I'm currently waiting for a delivery from London - long wait - nothing yet.

I try to stick to a routine. Wake up at seven, think until about eight. Get up, check my recorded messages, feed the cat and take my tablets. I have my breakfast and my first cuppa. I go for a shower, make my bed. Sit and think. Have a coffee around ten thirty. Sit and think. Perhaps I will notice the dust on the hearth, dust it off (nothing nicer than a shiny black hearth to reflect the living flame). Then I Hoover and wash the pots and hang some washing out.

At noon I usually have a sandwich and a piece of cake and watch what's going on in Westminster. But that is as repetitive as solitude and so full of hate and argument that I switch it off and grumble to myself about the TV licence. It could be a source of company and entertainment, but instead it sits in the corner like a threat - full of 'celebrities' doing ridiculous things - again and again!

In the afternoon, if the weather is fine, I take a walk around (and around) my garden. It is part of this place called Solitude that looks just like my house. My neighbours, lovely people, built a high stone wall. I never really minded the wall but nowadays I notice that it cuts off my view. It's an unfriendly wall. It encloses my solitude. It isolates me from the world. I know now how animals in captivity must feel ---

--- not a good train of thought!

Take a deep breath. Count to ten. Smile. Put the kettle on. Pick up a good book.

I always wanted time to just ponder and relax. Now I have the time, I must make the best of it and remember that there is good news about a vaccine and spring is just around the corner. In fact I see my snowdrops breaking through the soil just outside my window and my son will be knocking on the glass on his way home from work soon.

I am warm. I am safe. Someone cares.

Survival (Not a poem) - R Barrett

Late-twenties, good degree, good job, works out in the gym.
Single and works in the city.
Any city will do in finance or marketing, who cares?
He lives in a house or flat, a rental,
Free to follow the jobs, always upwards,
No longer has to share, stands on his own feet.
The car is new, £219 a month, rarely driven.
The journey to work by bus or the metro.
It's the parking a pain further in.
Half the staff female half the staff male,
They like to say girls, they mean women.
They like to say lads not men.
Both with the same good degrees
Both want careers not friendships, with competitors not colleagues,
for bonus and rungs.
A 'me too' clause in the contract irrelevant,
The smiles, bared teeth. Teambuilding weekends, trials of strength.
HR tick-box appraisals look cloned. It's all about the job with an optional more;
For the women lack of men when they mean ones with money and status.
For the men, someone their own age.
Well dressed for the job means dressed for the battle.
That moment's pause to be human, a weakness that's used.
The one you warmed to, takes a misercord to that chink in your armour,
Worse still through your helmet's eye slit.
You see it come from the one you liked.
Feelings become collateral damage.
The lad's weekends move from Prague to Tallin,
The girls hit Barcelona and Rome,
With money to burn they party and vent.
It's eight or more years till the alarm rings, for any of the women he knows.
By then he must have the position she wants, she demands.
If she stops for a second she may lose her place,
And he must provide, maintain.
Till then?
Jack Vettriano, artist or illustrator, emotive or erotic?
It depends where you stand to see 'Baby Bye Bye.'
She stands mug in hand, expectant, always expectant and knowing,
With that view of the grey, damp, cold world through the window behind her.
She knows a 'he's always coming.'
She's dressed in her work clothes, dressing gown and smile.
He knocks.
She hears the sound. Diffident, confident, or brash, she can tell.
She tightens the dressing gown belt and adjusts the smile to fit.

And she clicks the kettle on
He enters, the formalities soon done.
Now follows the warm friendly welcome, and smile tailored to suit.
The clock only starts as the dressing gown slips to the floor, not before'
The choreographed magic of tenderness starts.
The wellbeing massage, of his mind and soul
The bodies entwined
The protected and frantic
The longed for closeness
For five minutes each, directed, not rushed.
Then the tea. He's been there before.
The chat.
As many teabags as condoms.
Ten minutes, not rushed.
GFE or therapy?
Can it go further?
It could. It may.
The dressing gown on, they move to the door.
She says,
"Hun' You're welcome, come back anytime," and a kiss.
She means it.
He will, he must.

Touch - C Thompson

His skin is hungry, ravenous
for something of the same
curious texture to corrode into his own.
Blood on thick calluses.
Under his hat, scarf and gloves
He harbours a desire
that is misunderstood.
Yesterday is already forgotten.
For a copy of The Times
this is his one, one and only
chance. What a pretty young lady,
A Blondie.
When he hands her a note
it's 1968 again
She brushes so lightly his breath stops
It spreads like a stain,
the fleeting fingertips of another

The Fish on an Iced-Over Pond - A Beresford

Apart and solitary, locked out in an alien world, a fish lay frantically flapping on an iced-over pond.

Beneath the translucent, impregnable screen, his brother bream darted

about in their element. Occasionally, a perplexed visitor from below would mouth bubbles of welcome to him, not comprehending his separation.

Awesome thoughts of a perpetual isolation crowded in on him.

He was struggling to breathe.

Where was the enveloping embrace of his underwater home? What was this strange sensation of atmospheric motion that so excited his body? How came he here when he could see below the fellowship of piscine life: the rhythmic flow of gliding bodies?

His body shook convulsively.

All his senses, incompatible to this foreign environment, contrived to

exacerbate the dread of a never-ending singleness. His eyes could make no sense of the disorder of shapes surrounding him. His flesh recoiled from the frozen solidity beneath him.

He would not survive here.

If, he told himself, he could control his emotions, there might be, just might be, a way back in. A crack, the slightest aperture for him to slip through and find release from the tortuous configurations of unfathomable forms that bore down on him: an escape from the stultifying confusion of a world of fear.

Thus resolved though still shaking insuppressibly, the fish scrambled, desperately searching for the mercy of a fissure in an iced-over pond.

ISOLATION - T Haddon

I sit all alone, watch a silent phone, wait for a change from a dialling tone. Ring, please ring. I can't do this on my own.

In the gloom and doom of a stone cold room, enclosing me like a fear-filled tomb, I cry. And everything's black, we're under attack, deaths stack, hope we lack and my mind begins to crack.

I've no strength to fight the virus's might, victory is far from my sight in this darkest night And I can see no light as fear begins to bite. But Covid has no right to seal a sorry plight.

But each alone we can't wage a war, can't even the score but we must try, I'm sure, to shut this door, to just do more.

Isolation is ruining our nation, wrecking our children's education, bringing devastation and ruination.

Information comes of medication. Our salvation from the tribulation of each mutation?

And we hear our mumbling, bumbling, fumbling, stumbling, crumbling, hazy, lazy, crazy, Prime Crime Minister

Tell us to keep apart, worry about lungs not heart, it's just a start, being smart.

He says "Isolate". No debate. No questioners to interrogate this head of state leading us to our fate

While isolation breaks me inside, but I try my fear to hide as to everyone I've lied "I'm fine" and cried and cried and silently died, inside.

But hark there's a complication, a dastardly mutation, beastly provocation to prolong the duration of our isolation.

And my mind is scarred, each memory marred by every shard of fear that has caught me off guard in times so hard.

It's manic, sheer panic, satanic.

All alone I lie and cry, look to the sky and sigh, ask the universe will I live or die, is my end nigh?

And I ask, and I ask, and I ask, am I up to the task and I put on the mask whilst inside I'm barely alive.

If I don't isolate it will complicate my fate, but I hate not knowing how long I must wait to open up to a mate.

Meeting people is my motivation to get through each complication, that's the compensation after every provocation of this violation's devastation.

And then a ray breaks through, can it be true, did you hear it too? A world made new. A cure we're due.

So I sit again by the phone which I know will now ring, make my heart sing, hope bring. improve everything.

And there's a tangible peace as all strivings cease, joys increase and worries release.

Hold my hand, help me stand,
Feel my touch, it'll mean so much,
Let me kiss, that's my wish,
Stand by my side, while only tears of joy are cried,
Reach my heart, no longer apart,
I see you, you see me, may that always be.

No more isolation or devastation.
Pure salvation.

Lockdown Blues - I Mosley

Another day dawns – what to do today?
This won't take long
The choices are the same as yesterday
Stay home, Save lives, Protect the NHS
It all makes such sense
Beat the virus, isolate and suppress.

What is your mind set – what do you think?
Another boring, lonely day
Going down the plughole in the sink?
Missing the loved ones you long to hug
Life was so simple
Before Coronavirus pulled away the rug

All the things you used to take for granted
Meeting family and friends
Trips to the cinema, a coffee when you wanted
Down bustling High Streets, out and about
Not realising what it meant
To have no restrictions on days in or days out

Until the social interaction ceased
No more trips out
Strict rules to follow, in Tier 4 at least
Not even next door for a cuppa and a chat
Just the same dull four walls
That invisible barrier, the front door mat

But worry not, says Boris, at last help is on hand
Jabs going into arms
At vaccination centres up and down the land
Infection rates falling, hospitalisations are down
Fewer people dying
A smile gradually replacing the frown

It won't be back to normal this month (or this year?)
But together we will get there
Lifting the gloom, banishing the fear
Of this little virus, deadly yet invisible to the eye

Which has killed so many
And brought so much havoc for you and for I

Feelings of isolation - R Oldfield

Unreasonable thoughts,
A mind full of doubt.
No sense of belonging
Dark notions ooze out.

Worthless and useless
No need to be here
Days stretch out so endless
With gut-gnawing fear.
Jerkily anxious
Can't leave it behind.
Need to be free
From an unrelenting mind.

Safe havens unclear now
Swallowed up in the mist.
Nothing to turn to,
No soft gentle kiss.
A glimpse of warmth given
Cruelly pushed out of reach
No energy to soothe it
Yet occasion to preach.

The wall starts to crumble
Foundations were weak.
The lightning strike flashes
Not one thing is unique.
The feelings of oneness
In an instant wiped out
The distance increasing
With the growth of the doubt.

Then dawn starts to break
And the storm it abates.
Still a blanket of drizzle
Just blots out the gates.
Not a swallow flies freely

There's no shrill curlew sound.

And the coffin is lowered
With no care to the ground.

Lockdown Lin - J Wilkinson

I feel so lonely, having only
Sky, the cat, to talk to.
No offspring of my own, and
just one brother fifty miles away.

My mother used to say,
I have to be very grateful for
the life that I am living.
Many folk are much worse off.

Coronavirus has ended the
hobbies I had been trying.
The vicar at St Mary's uses
the internet to keep in touch.

My garden makes me happy.
Early morning, during this
beautiful weather, it's been
lovely to just sit, with a cuppa.

I'm usually joined on the bench by
Sky and Milo (the cat from next door).

My other main hobby is reading.
I've a series of novels on the go.
Martin Walker's descriptions of
French countryside and food,
really make my mouth water.

I recall a day out last year, when
Liz, Jed, Caroline and I caught a
steam train from Leicester station.
Tornado was running to Carlisle.

To my surprise, at Chesterfield,
Liz's sister, Jan hopped aboard
and joined us for the day.
It was laughter all the way.

Traversing Ribble Head Viaduct
was truly awe inspiring.

When Lockdown is over: Jan will

visit Dublin, to see the Book of Kells.
Liz and Jed will go walkabout.
Penrith is the place I yearn for.

The best is yet to happen.
My great niece is waiting
to be born, in Bedford.
Celebrations welcoming her to
the family will be held in isolation.

We will meet her post pandemic.

Forgotten - N Moncrieff

A forlorn reminder to busy times past
Stands abandoned lost in weeds
Sun glints off shards of glass
Snags as sharp as witches teeth.

Doors hang limp on rusty hinges
Banging in the wind
Sound echoing down empty rooms
Of a building left skinned.

Life once bustled in busy halls
The sound of people chatting
All that stays are inky scrawls
After all have been sent packing.

A ray of light peeps through a crack
Lighting up the situation
A year of pain and grief
A life in isolation.

A Start - A Morton

The big day had arrived, the first day of freedom after being locked down for three months.

I got ready to drive to Belper, making sure my face mask was with my shopping list so I wouldn't forget it as I usually did. Online shopping had been good, but there were always things out of stock, and usually the essential things like toilet paper, pasta and beer! The shop down the road had remained open but there were always massive queues right around the car park, regardless of the weather.

Stepping outside into the fresh air was invigorating. I had enjoyed getting outdoors in lock-down, everything seemed somehow fresher and colours more vibrant.

I was not impressed when a sudden gust of wind blew my parking ticket from the machine as it dropped. I then had to chase it down the car park before stomping my boot on it to stop it escaping completely. It had felt like a big boot had been stomped down on us recently, controlling us, stopping us moving.

Ticket now safely on display, I set off towards King Street, walking between Poundland and the Railway pub. A usually very familiar street to me, it now seemed odd with less shops open, and those that were had queues outside.

Joining the queue for one of these, I fitted my mask and got a safe distance from the old lady in front. I was soon joined by someone else. I could hear him jabbering away on his phone and sounding a lot closer than he should have been. I turned around to see he had no mask and was within touching distance, violating my space! I forced a cough and he backed off a bit. That'll teach him, but then the lady in front tutted and also moved a bit further away from me.

Filling my trolley with the things I needed that they did have, I arrived at a perspex screen, protecting the checkout assistant.

"That will be £14 please. Would you like any face masks or hand gels with your shopping today?"

I smiled presenting my contactless card, they would normally ask if you wanted any promotional chocolates or sweets.

I really wanted to rip off my mask when I got outside but it would mean touching it, spreading germs, and I would only have to put it back on again two minutes later for the next shop.

Everyone else was wearing masks on the street, including a friend I spotted who I hadn't seen for a while. I didn't feel like stopping to chat, it was all a bit weird wearing masks. I just put my hand up and he did the same, revealing a blue surgical glove. Later, when I did remove my mask, I took in a deep breath. It was such a relief.

I felt good, liberated. Perhaps there was light at the end of this tunnel, a return to normality? At least this was a start.

Isolation - R Horne

He washes me. Again. He did it ten minutes ago. By the light reflected from the grey rain outside he looks for a grease spot on me which is not there.

It is 9.29 am. He turns off the radio. He avoids twice hourly coronanews. For months he has kept the virus, and everyone, out of his home but still it seeps in via radio, TV and internet. He feels he is never free from it. The “off” switch is his final refuge - his only remaining source of empowerment.

He turns from me to watch the rain falling on the window. Streaks of watery light are running ever downwards, some showing an inverted image of the house opposite but quickly lost in wet oblivion.

He looks back at me. He wipes me again. “Stop”, I want to say, “You have just done that”. He still cannot find that grease spot on me.

Groundhog Day time again.

He glances through the glazed back door to check that his car is still there. His eye drops down to the rusted brake disc and wonders again if his metal friend will start and move again. He has glanced out often and wondered this way hundreds of times. I have seen him. I want to reassure him that it will; it will come alive one day.

9.32 am. He turns the radio back on. A quiet song is playing. The presenter interrupts the end of it to talk about infection rates. His power to use the off switch is exercised again. For a moment he feels good about himself. Then the silence is back.

He goes to the TV and checks what he might watch over supper tonight. He finds a film he might like and saves it to memory. The screen tells him he has already chosen something else. Oh yes, he remembers, he did that earlier today.

He scratches his chin and discovers he has not shaved today. Strangely, he remembers doing it but perhaps not today. Mental note to do so required. Quickly forgotten.

He shares his food with a blackbird. Each day he walks out to the garden with another bread crust. He has already put today’s offering out on the bird table but he finds that the bread is also still in the kitchen. How can a thing be in two places simultaneously? Perhaps Schrödinger's Cat theory or the apparent paradoxes within quantum physics can be applied to a crust of bird bread?

For a moment he is lifted into the exquisite realms of the possibilities within particle physics. He is deliciously far from lockdown. Looking from a great distance, for a moment, he sees across the universe and the meaning of everything.

He smiles, looks back at me and lifts his cleaning cloth. Again.

That grease spot was there three days ago. He removed it three days ago.

He is alone and isolated. I wish I could help him.

But I am his kitchen worktop.

Untitled - J Groarke

Then

“...and that’s it. That’s what happened; or at least how your great-grandma remembered it. I don’t know how useful it will be for your project....”

“Thanks, Grandad. I’ll look after the diary – I won’t lose it, promise.”

Now

And I didn’t.

I don’t remember anything about my school project but I’ve still got the diary, safely hidden away. (*No-one for me to hand it on to.*) Strange to think that I’m now the same age as my Grandad was when he gave it to me...that last time I saw him.

Who’d have thought that something so microscopically small would have such immense consequences? Ensnaring, manipulating the future, making the past unreal, like a dream. There must be official records, news reports, documentaries... but you won’t find them anywhere on the Internet, not now! Most people don’t think about it, of course; or try not to. Most people haven’t got an eyewitness account, a daily record by someone who lived through it – a record which chronicles the stages on the road to where we are now. The small, seemingly minor steps which accumulated and coalesced to create a society that my great-grandma would find hard to recognise.

Right at the beginning, the Government’s decision that the economy had to come first; that people would have to take their chances with the virus; that something called “herd immunity” would eventually see everyone all right. Then, with cases escalating and hospitals unable to cope, the refusal to admit Covid patients – “much better that they should be surrounded by their loved ones”. No funerals – just tributes on social media. The diary soon stops recording the daily death toll...I suppose the Government wasn’t publishing it by that point. They were too intent on telling everyone how well they were doing in the war against the virus – if you repeat something often enough, eventually it’s “true”.

Living with the virus was the new normality. It became acceptable that high numbers of the old and vulnerable would die. It was sad, but things move on. From that perspective, it was not a huge step to further restrict access to the NHS – to save “the jewel in the crown” of public services. First were the smokers and drinkers; then the obese. Lifestyle choices could not be allowed to deny medical care to those who better deserved it. And then, the elderly - those who were now a drain on society - the most likely to succumb to any future pandemics and require expensive nursing care; those who were costing the economy millions in pension payments. Time for them to do the right thing for the sake of the young.

So here I am, alone on my bed, the Government pack open, its little capsules helpfully labelled, the glass of water on my bedside cabinet. No grandchildren keep me company, as I sat with my Grandad all those years ago.

The Corpse Corps will be along shortly to tidy up...

The Fly Tyer - D Ramsay

Tying concoctions of feather and tinsel to attract fish started in Roman times. He began as a boy and now he was an old man, escaping into this world, alone in a Pandemic. Tying flies and fishing were baked into his being.

Placing the tiny hook into the vice took care, turning the screw gently until it bit the metal. Too loose it fell out, too tight it broke.

Having tied many flies, he hoped the magic one that always caught fish was never created. That would destroy the uncertainty that made fishing special. If the journey ended so would his.

Winding thread at the hook's bend, he then stripped fibres from a hen's hackle for the tail. He remembered the wild places and moods of each river – a smooth glide in summer, an angry fury in winter.

You carefully waded into the river. A deep pool can swallow you. Blending with the river's flow, animals knew you were no threat but move clumsily and fish disappeared in a flash. Go gently, quietly and patiently. Enter a slower world.

Some fishermen fished as they lived, with impatience and rush, moving on in a tortured, fruitless journey, shouting to ask if you had caught anything without waiting for an answer. He took a bright silver spool from his tinsel box to be the tiny eye-catching glint in the river's maelstrom, making the fish grab the fly before its meal disappeared in the current.

In mid-river, casting the fly, he became entranced. When hungry, he would wade out to sit and smell the season - wildflower in summer, musty leaves in autumn. Once, an otter trotted along and stopped, raising its head in query, asking what he was doing there then, sliding into the water, swimming to the other bank. They were both fishermen.

He took a hare's mask, its dried eyeless shape accusing him of its death, plucked hair, and rolled it onto the thread to form a trick of light to fool the trout.

Once, a hare lolloped towards him. They both stared, the hare stooping flat to the earth, uncertain what to do. Then it sped off, its long powerful legs pushing it to full speed in a split second.

Catching in fine gold wire and ribbing it to the eye of the hook, he then inspected his work. Flies are tied to respect the art and the quarry. Badly tied flies did not deserve fish. Next, he pulled a stiff hackle from a cockerel's cape to sit the fly in the water's surface, as if trapped, enticing the fatter trout from under the trees and, if the stars were aligned and his mood allowed it, to be hooked.

Winding the hackle at the front of the hook he ran the thread through the fibres and

knotted the head to withstand wind and water. A dot of varnish and all was done. Another fly for a summer day when it might be safe to fish again.

Untitled - K Ryan

Isolation is a word that has recently injected itself into our vocabularies and has, unfortunately, made itself very comfortable.

The idea of isolation is to be alone, of course, and so this implies no company, no conversation and, perhaps, loneliness. However, this is not strictly true. Because you are not alone – you are in the presence of yourself, commonly thought of as “that” voice in your head.

Now, don't get me wrong, I am not about to launch into a spiel about how being alone with ourselves is a positive way to build self image or respect or the likes. In fact, I'd argue that this is what makes isolation so unbearable for so many; because when there is no one else around and no way to simply enter someone else's presence, the only person to hear your thoughts, the only person to perceive your presence is you/yourself. And we are forced to observe ourselves the way we so easily observe others.

Who are you when it's just you? So many of the ways we define ourselves as people rely on others. Friendly, chatty, private, caring, honest, witty; all of these attributes begin to fade when there is no one with whom we can be these things. Too much time alone and our sense of self, the perception of who we are that keeps our eyes forward, is endangered- it's existence even doubted in the first place. After all, what are we except a collection of thoughts and feelings, actions and conversations, interactions and situations? Remove other people, remove the outdoors, insert mundanity and regularity at all hours of the day and your character becomes increasingly obsolete, the coloured tint of “humorous” or “clever” or “caring” replaced with simply an experience.

And what of our little quirks? The awkward way in which I run or the tapping of my fingers when I'm deep in thought- do I still do those? Is it because I've not been outside/ able to run in 3 weeks or because there is no one around to notice?

Your life can take on a sort of meaningless mundanity; every laugh, smile, accidental trip over a stair, unpopular opinion, nuanced political take, witty comeback to an imagined conversation, profound realisation is wasted- an endless stream of thoughts that are unshared and then forgotten.

Isolation is a feeling of insignificance, rather than loneliness.

But whilst the cheerfulness and the humour and the friendly attitude you value in yourself fades for lack of opportunity to exercise them, your vulnerabilities and insecurities and weak moments become harder and harder to ignore. All that is left to define yourself with are the parts you hate and your free time to evaluate and reflect on this fact is suddenly in abundance.

Isolation Working From Home - A Jones

It's not so great, to isolate
When you're forty-eight and you're gaining weight.
Don't underrate, there's no debate,
When that's your fate, it's not so great.

When your working on the sofa cos you haven't got a desk
Life starts to feel a little grotesque
I'm getting cross on a call to my boss
When the dog goes berserk as I'm trying to work

Another cup of coffee helps to get me through the morning
Whenever the job is getting too boring.
One eye on the telly cos no one will know
Just for a short while, only a mo

Philip and Holly, Eamonn and Ruth
Getting bored of them all, to tell you the truth
But working in silence is not for me
So the TV stays on, for my sanity.

A trip to the fridge for something to eat
Something savoury or something sweet
Not due to hunger, just because I'm so bored
Another temptation that can't be ignored.

Lunchtime comes, so I grab the dog lead
And out of the house for a short while I'm freed
With a spring in my step and fresh air in my face
For just a few minutes I'm out of my place

When I see another walker, I don't get too close
I weigh up the distance when I see them approach
Can I get past them with two metre gaps?
Mmmm, not sure. Maybe, perhaps

Some people get scared and turn on their heels
Or hide in the bushes, a scary ordeal
One man climbed a wall when I got in his way
And over the fields he scurried away.

The afternoon beckons, so back to the laptop

With emails and phone calls coming in non stop
Online training that I need to get started
More often than not, a little half hearted

By the end of the day, when it's getting rather tough
And I'm starting to feel enough is enough
It's a relief to put the laptop away
Stored under the stairs for another day

The weeks and months pass. One after another
With every day feeling just like any other
The days blur together and it messes with my head
But would I rather be back in the office instead?

For all my complaining I'm not so sure
That I'm ready to go back through the company door.

ALONE - S Boyle

I talk but no one listens
I write but no one reads
I cry but no one soothes me
I yearn but no one relieves

I work but no one pays me
I cook but no one eats
I laugh but no one smiles at me
I turn up but no one meets

I'm ready but no one's in trouble
I fool but no one stares
I'm free but no one wants me
I dance but no one cares

I warn but no one heeds me
I care but no one needs
I wait but no one is there
I follow but no one leads

I queue but no one meets me
I catch but no one falls
I wait but no one asks me
I listen but no one calls

I'm supportive but no one's beside me
I'm looking but no one waves
I'm first but nothing is there for me
I'm drowning but no one saves

I'm broke but no one lends me
I'm lost but no one keeps
I'm sexy but no one comes on to me
I am dying but no one weeps.

Isolation - J Sheldon

They say I have to isolate
As if I have done wrong....
The only crime I'm guilty of
Is living for so long

They say this makes me vulnerable....
The chances are I'd die
If this Corona virus came....
To look me in the eye

I've now become a prisoner
Within my own four walls
No family to visit me
No friendly faces call

I try to find something to do
To keep me occupied....
Sometimes I've felt so miserable
I've just sat down and cried

But feeling sorry for myself....
Well.... what good does that do?
I've got to count my blessings now....
And take a different view

I'm still alive, I'm safe and warm
I've got to take control
Of what I can in all of this....
Not play the 'victim' role

I'll start by picking up the phone
And chatting with a friend....
I'm 'on my own' but not alone
In this until it ends

They say I have to isolate
I know it's for the best
But I just had to have a moan
And get it off my chest

I've had my jab so that's a start....
Stepped in the right direction....
Before too long there'll be no need

For prolonged isolation

Untitled - L Knight

Suddenly I'm confined to four walls because of a virus that I cannot see. The whole world has been turned upside down, and sadly some families have lost loved ones because of this unseen enemy.

It's been a case of home deliveries for food, and internet shopping for other items. I love browsing around the shops and have been denied doing so! Thank goodness for the internet though and zoom. At least I meet my poetry friends on there, and we still share our love of poetry together.

We do have a lot to be thankful for, with all the people who have kept everything going, and the NHS and carers for their wonderful work. With the Covid jabs being administered now, at least there's hope on the horizon for us all. Perhaps I "will" be browsing round the shops eventually!

I do go for a walk once a day and enjoy breathing in the fresh air, hearing the birdsong and seeing the cattle and sheep grazing in the fields, so this is my isolation break for a short while. The sheep are getting to the point where they will soon be producing lambs. I love seeing them leaping up into the air off all four legs and frolicking around the field chasing each other. Sometimes when the ewes lay down the lambs even leap on to their mothers back.

I enjoy a walk down by the river and watch the swans gliding along on the water. Sometimes the Cob proudly holds up his wings in a curved feathered arch and stabs at the noisy geese with his long yellow beak as he swims past them. The Pen just glides along with her head held high and watches him. They will be nesting on the island in the river soon.

At this time of year, the drakes are in full colour with fluorescent green heads and curly black feathers near their tails, showing off to the females as they quack noisily. A little black moorhen runs along the path with her long yellow legs looking for food. A grey heron sits perfectly still on an old tree trunk stuck on the riverbed. His beady eyes searching for fish swimming underneath the water. Suddenly his head disappears below the surface and he catches his prey. He throws up his head and swallows the fish, shakes himself and starts preening his feathers. A robin appears in a tree nearby and sings a song. He cocks his heads sideways to look at me then flies off. The Peregrines are flying around making a lot of noise as they chase a flock of pigeons. They will soon be nesting on the old mill.

As I walk along the central path of the gardens the old bandstand stands proud, echoing brass bands that have played there in the past.

Oh well, it's time to go home, back to four walls and isolation again I'll get the brushes out and have a go at painting.....perhaps birds?

Coronavirus - G Mulliner

Can't see a film
Or go out for a bite though
Reading fills hours and
Offers respite
No meeting, no swimming, no football, no friends
And the
Virus rampages
It follows no trends
Remember the times when we
Used to exist?
So open a bottle but don't get too drunk.

Isolation - F Towns

Chapter 1 - Inside

I see the faces. I hear the voices. We talk. I feel distant. Alone. We say goodbye. I turn off the screen. The house is quiet. The clock is ticking. I make a cup of tea. I look at the clock. I drink my tea. I look through the window. I see the leaves blow by. I wash my cup. Tick tock goes the clock. Tick tock, tick tock.

I look around... a tidy house, a clean house, chores all done. I have tidied. I have cleaned. I have done the chores. I read a book. I watch TV. I make a sandwich. Tick tock, tick tock. I get ready for bed. I lie awake. How long has it been? Here, alone, inside. Tick tock.

Chapter 2 - Outside

The sun shines. The birds sing. I grab my coat, my shoes, my keys. Walk to the door. Excited, scared. I hesitate. I walk outside. At last outside. The sun is warm. The breeze is cool. My legs stretch out. I smell the damp leaves. I see the colours of the flowers. I hear a blackbird sing.

A bench invites me to sit. Memories of a summer picnic. Memories of friends. Laughter and company. I smile. I cry. I see a dog walker, a family in the distance. I freeze. I tense. I panic. I stand up. I walk home. Alone.

Chapter 3 - The Visitor

A lonely breakfast. I sit. I stare at the walls. The phone rings. I jump. I voice from far away. A chat, too soon ended. Then it is silent. Too quiet. Alone. I eat my porridge. I drink my tea. I wash up.

A knock at the door. I jump up. I find the keys. I open the door. A smile. A person. A real smile! The gift of fresh bread. A thanks. A wave. I take the warm loaf. I close the door. I hold the warm loaf in an embrace. I am sad. A moment of connection gone all too quickly.

Chapter 4 - Reunited

The radio on. News of visits resumed. I smile. I remember. I hope. I sit alone. I wait and I wait.

A knock at the door. Family! Children and grandchildren! A warm embrace. Arms hold me tight. I laugh. I smile. I cry. No longer alone. Together. We talk. We play. We hug. We walk. We hug again. I am not alone.

The car drives off. The noise has gone. I am alone again. Fresh memories. I smile. I look at the calendar. I count the days until they visit again.

Touch - S Aitch

"Remember what it felt like to touch people?"

I no longer remember where I heard the question, only that it was asked casually, intended to empathise rather than invite thought. It may have been on the radio, part of some trivial chat piece. It might have even been a commercial. That sounds more plausible these days, sympathy as a sales tool. Either way, it has stuck with me, that innocent little enquiry, and I find myself dwelling on it now, from time to time.

Physical touch. We could not have foreseen a situation where simple acts like handshakes, pats on the shoulder, hugs from loved ones, would be denied to us. Camaraderie is our national identity. Coming together in times of crisis is what we've done throughout history. It's what we're known for. A crisis is a chance to come together, keep each other's spirits lifted, and offer the simple human contact that buoys our spirits. Without that we are rudderless. Adrift in this moment of strife. Can I remember the last time I touched another human being, or was touched? The accidental brushing up against someone while walking? Even that now seems a distant memory.

I realise my thoughts are maudlin now, which gives me pause. "Remember what it felt like to touch people?" That was the question niggling at the edges of my thoughts. But perhaps I'd misunderstood it all along. I look around me. There are still rainbows taped to the glass panes on the front window. Faded now but there in solidarity. A message on my phone, thanking me for the loaf of bread I'd carefully left on my friend's back porch, knowing the smell alone would lift her spirits. A card, pinned to the notice board; an offer of help dating back almost a year now, but still there as a reminder of the community spirit the town has shown. The almost imperceptible nods exchanged from a distance on daily walks - understanding, a wry humour, or just a much-needed moment of connection.

I see all these things and I realise the question is flawed. We never stopped touching people, not in the ways that matter. We touch people every day, with our grace and our kindness. Our good humour and our quiet solidarity. Connection looks different these days, but it's still there, just as strong as ever. Sure I am of this, that you only have to endure to conquer.

Untitled - J Hibbert

I live on my own. I wake up to hear the birds singing and daylight coming through my curtains. I am warm, snuggled up in bed. I read for a while and then get up and ready to face the day. I can see people walking past my window, some on their own, some with children, couples, families and others with dogs. I look what colours they are wearing, are they wrapped up for the cold? Cars go past, sometimes a van. I wonder what time the postman will come today and whether he will have anything for me. I read the paper which has just arrived through my door. I sign onto my computer and check my e-mails to see what is on offer and to contact a few friends. It's too cold to meet one for a walk and we can't meet in a café or each other's houses. Today I decide to phone a friend to see how they are and we have a long chat. I'm not going out. I have a friendly delivery man bring me some food and my daughter gets me the rest. I am so grateful. Sometimes when she brings my shopping, she brings my grandson. He is 3 and his smile melts my heart. He doesn't understand why grandma can't hug him and he can't come in my home to play. It is so long since we have cuddled. He changes every time I see him. His hair is getting long like mine. He's not impressed when mummy offers to cut it. He tells me he is going to nursery soon and blows me kisses. I wave as they drive off in the car. I have a lovely hot mug of tea and a small slice of cake- delicious. I listen to the television and do my ironing. I listen to music as I wash up. The phone rings, my carrots are at my daughter's house- she'll bring them tomorrow. I have a lovely pink hyacinth plant- one stem is nearly fully out and 2 are getting a bit bigger each day, so shouldn't be long before they bloom. They smell beautiful. I have a few snowdrops in my garden and buds on my daffodils. Spring is on the way. I go to the bin and a neighbour shouts to see if I am OK and we chat about the weather. I go and sit in my comfy chair with a magazine and feel relaxed and content. I may live on my own, but I am not lonely or isolated. I have family, friends, neighbours, birds and flowers to keep me company and it will soon be Spring. I have had my first vaccination, so may soon be able to venture out again. I look forward to hugging and playing with my grandson, sitting in the garden and a drink and chat with friends. Oh- It's time for another cup of tea and my favourite TV programmes. Must go.

Isolation? - E Silvey

Stepping outside into a riot of stars. “Such splendid isolation!” the estate agent had said; there are not even streetlights to mask the sparkling crystals in the sky.

In winter, however, clear skies are the harbinger of cold. The thermometer shows minus too-far-down, car keys almost dropping from numb fingers, before my thick fleece and a defiant metabolism win out.

With the engine’s roar, I am no longer alone, but have a partner of metal and glass, dashboard lit with orange, and headlights searching through the darkness. Cheery voices from the radio talk incongruously of politics, business, education: topics far-removed from this empty road, where my car and I could be the only warm beings for miles, and only one of us truly alive.

Tyres skitter nervously on ice that has been shaped by the wind into waves like the traces of snakes through sand. Every now and then, the white beams of security lights reflect from deeper, frozen pools, but the houses are still dark, haunted only by ghosts and owls, their inhabitants transfixed in enchanted sleep within.

Few people own this dark before the dawn, but now the farms are stirring, and I start to pass others on the road, travelling towards or home from the workplaces that never sleep. Other headlights smile or glare, hold back or roar past, although their drivers are indistinct – eyes forward and arms extended – like mannequins in a hundred variations of the same pose.

Moving ever onwards, the transformation gathers pace, each corner drawing a few more threads of light from the horizon, spun filigree of pink and gold. Grey leaves awaken into green, as the hush of night draws languorously back, releasing a cascade of both beautiful and raucous noise: honking geese in pointed arrows overhead, and plaintive gulls riding the breeze.

My other senses take note, registering the scent of coffee that has been present all along, carefully prepared to enjoy in the breath of time between travel and the working day. Even through the car windows, the sun’s rays start to touch my skin with warmth, which is a new development; until recently, they remained hidden for much longer, and emerged only to light the frost with brilliance, without troubling to melt it.

Nearing the town, reality has coalesced around me. Drivers are individuals, and there are free-range people too, recognisable in suits or uniforms, moving with intent, or dragged along by bounding dogs. A man with a worn rucksack hunches his shoulders against the chill, and a toddler on a rein is held back, reaching out in vain to try and pick snowdrops from a verge. Others look out from bus windows, grazing glances with passers-by.

It is hard to imagine, when first journeying forth alone, but the dawn has revealed that I am only one of many voyagers, with many destinations, each setting out – or staying in – to take our places in the world.

Untitled - C Pfaff

In the dog-days of summer, life can be a joy,
Stepping out, Wedgwood blue to the skyline;
Old friends come along, leaves thrill to the breeze,
Lost content might foment in a dry wine.
All is dread, though, when winter's wolf keens at the door,
Trees disrobe, the wind ragged and mean;
Infinite as fear, and rank as a blight:
On the wolf's back rides Covid-19.
Now I shrink from the door, from the plague-ridden wretch,
And my life slams shut, fear my quintessence;
Throat contracts, life-blood creeps: see, I dwindle, I fade,
But the wolf – the wolf swells to tumescence.
For the old, the alone, winter draws down a veil,
A pandemic might finesse a shroud,
While the young, in their prime, may too be struck down
When a void steals the space of a crowd.
In times such as these, the world in lockdown
'Gainst a virus that delights in mutation,
Our windows lie bare, where schoolchildren ran:
Just the sougning wind speaksISOLATION.

I sweep away cobwebs, slap paint on a wall,
Clear cupboards, purge many a drawer;
Though I'm frugal with food, must stock up the fridge:
But I sit here and stare at the door.
Last night the Chief Medical Officer spoke,
Brought the Slough of Despond to my screen:
"I bring you bad tidings" (but he seems a nice bloke)
"Of the threat posed by Covid-19.
Hospital wards brimming, you must stay indoors,
ISOLATION will halt this disease".
The i-word looms large, all but squats on my brain,
A raw fear has laid claim to my knees.
Toothache is raging, no drugs in the house,
But somewhere there's a toolbox with pliers.
My brain's running rampant: could I staunch all the blood
When my jaw splits, then splice it with wires?!
But my pen breeds catharsis, the heart finds its stride,
Though I still sit, transfixed, by the door,
And the goblin still squats on the lobes of my brain:

CONTROLLED

ISOLATION! There, I've said it once more.
The brain ceases to race, the mad prattle subsides,
Though my knees quake with rude non-compliance;
Which fails to surprise me, as I age I've become
A great challenge to medical science.
In some longago land I lived for the dance;
Long, long before this wretched virus:
Now my hernia rankles, I clutch at my groin
-----Not entirely unlike Miley Cyrus.

There it is, the spell burst here's laughter again!
Well alright, I can't leap like a lord,
But I write ISOLATION: subjugated in print
It's no more than a nine-letter word.
Now I sense that the goblin's beginning to squirm,
Still it straddles my brain as I linger,
Its mouth now transformed in a rictus of fear.
See! My uproarious pen 'twixt thumb and finger.

A Haiku Journey Through the Pandemic - M Woodcock

1. What is happening?
A strange virus has arrived
It's spreading quickly
2. Stay at home, save lives
The National Health Service
must be protected
3. Panic purchasing
Buy toilet roll and pasta
It's time to lockdown
4. So we can survive,
Let's sacrifice key workers
but give them a clap
5. I learn to use Zoom
Have a quiz night with my friends
Keeping connected
6. I go for a walk
Get fresh air and exercise
Discover nature
7. A long time goes by
Will life return to normal?
My spirits get low
8. Lockdown loneliness
Isolation from my friends
Sucks away my soul
9. Where is my mother?
In the care home, feeling sad
Forgetting my name
10. Some have lost their jobs
People been made redundant
Not enough money
11. My business is gone
Everything that I worked for
In the last decade

12. The struggle is real
Where is there to go from here?
I feel desperate
13. I hit rock bottom
Suicide is an option
Provides an answer
14. Taking my own life
Never thought of it before
Driven to despair
15. Out, pestilence, out!
A pox on this pandemic!
I'm sick of this plague!
16. Who else feels like this?
I ask myself this question
I am not alone
17. What is to be done?
Scientists find a vaccine
In miracle time
18. Try to be happy
The vaccination programme
is providing hope
19. There is light ahead
Stay focused on the future
We will live again
20. Sometime soon enough
Life will return to normal
It's happened before
21. A little more time
The programme is progressing
Support key workers
22. Reach out to loved ones
Be patient, stay positive
We are nearly there

23. Not long to go now
We can do this together
Thank you NHS.

New Shoots - A Franks

Jo watched the raindrops rolling down the window which framed the grey car park below, He wasn't sure how he had ended up here alone. The clock struck four, life had become a routine, he moved through the day on clockwork, getting up, showering, eating, and going to bed at the same time. He played the radio in the morning and switched the TV on in the afternoon, careful never to let the silence fall in the flat. Drawing the curtains, he saw the young boy opposite looking out of his window, so Jo raised his hand and the boy eagerly waved back. There were worse things than being old and isolated, imagine being young and stuck alone indoors.

He remembered as he often did, the day they had moved in, Rosey was bursting with pride, a new flat, new fittings and curtains hung fresh from the plastic wrapping. They hadn't known that she would only live for another ten months. She would have coped with lockdown so much better than he did, she would have talked on the phone to family, chatted at the checkout and checked the neighbours were fine. He of course could do none of these things, he had been taught to be tough and strong but not how to chat and smile and pass the time of day with strangers.

It was a few days later, shopping bag in one hand and a key in another that Jo noticed a battered cardboard box on his doorstep. Once over the threshold with the door locked against the world, He peered into the box to find two plant pots each filled with rich black earth. He looked around for signs of where they had come from but there was no note or label. Well there was no point in leaving them inside to dry out, so he placed the pots on his small balcony.

On the days when it was dry, he watered the plants, each time the boy and himself would acknowledge each other with a wave, within a month there was some green shoots pushing out of the soil. Checking his plants each day he started to nod to the lady next door, he had never noticed her before. Next time he went shopping he brought some plant food and chatted to the young girl at the till about his surprise present. The green shoots grew into firm stems and then eventually little buds exploded into yellow daffodils. Looking around he noticed every one of the flats had pots of daffodils on their balconies, it was a sea of gold. The boy at the window gave a thumbs up and had a grin from ear to ear.

As Jo came back indoors, he smiled, along his windowsill there where rows of tiny tomato plants. in the corner were two large bags of compost and a pile of plant pots, more than enough for everyone in the flats.

Isolation - A Cooper

Some things can be good, some things can be bad
some make you happy and some make you sad
a rose can be pretty but can stab you with its thorn
a day has its dusk, and a day has its dawn
if you look in a cloud, you'll find a silver lining
you'll find a piece of gold if you do a bit of mining

To rid the world of this virus, we must follow our
country's regulations
as should the others, who live in their nations
if we all work together to create a protective shield,
we can attack this virus with the sword that we wield
if you must leave your home for things that are required
make sure you return as they're acquired

If you do get a bit lonely as the time passes by
give someone a ring, a girl or a guy
this will help you whilst also helping others
they could be sisters and they could also be brothers
some people don't have family, so make them feel at ease
I'm telling you now, you'll find it a breeze

If you get a bit bored whilst stuck in the house
watch a nice film with your children or spouse
it helps take your mind off things by taking you
to another land
it could be somewhere rough and it could be somewhere grand
you could fly to another country and never leave your seat
but if you want a bit of popcorn, you'll have to get on your feet

We all need to greet people with wide open arms
this will help vanish all of their qualms
it will make their worries seem a lot smaller
it will let them stand that little bit taller
safety comes first, then comes pleasure
if you follow this, there'll always be treasure
just make sure you all work together
if you do this, you'll be happy forever

Reading to escape - G Southall

Here
Alone
some third floor tenement
smoking through open window
snow falling as ash
settles and takes
shadow forms
locusts with men's faces
shuffle silver wings
a plague upon our houses
from Birmingham to Baghdad
fire dances and devours
leading dogs without a leash
laid waste the fruitful vineyards
silence steals down like a thief
idols with iron eyes
topple crack reform
London, Paris, Rome
first lightning, now the storm
Then
shored against certain ruin
wind blows the window shut
make some coffee
Alas the day
read another book

Isolation - P Jones

Into a troubled Spring we went: what is this news we hear?
An illness in a far-off land? Might it simply ... disappear?
Slowly, slowly, came the news that none did want to hear.
Creeping ever near these shores, a rising tide of fear.

Onward did the illness come, by land and sea and air,
amid anxiety and dread, and deepening despair.
Lockdown was a new-found word that people learned to say:
relentless loneliness each morn, and Hope so far away.

Avoiding others everyday became the new, sad norm;
and thoughts that we would surely meet ignored the gathering storm.
Tormented by the thought that we might catch or spread the ill,
we hunkered down in each hometown, as the virus roamed at will.

Lonely, furloughed and forlorn, our world shrank week by week.
Home schooling, online learning ... Oh! the future looked so bleak!
Hospitals were pivotal – through visor, gown and glove,
dispensing hope and therapies, with tender care and love.

Ovations for the NHS brought many an evening cheer,
but moments of togetherness could not dispel the fear.
No comfort for the desperate plight, when nursing homes faced Death,
and patient after patient exhaled their final breath.

Many were those workers who continued in their tasks,
not safe within some shielded room, but front-line, armed with masks.
Many were those principled and gallant people who
risked experimental trials to help us all pull through.

Numbers, numbers, every day ... calamity laid bare.
By day a social distancing; at night, a silent prayer.
And onward still the illness came, relentlessly once more,
with solitary silence at many a shuttered door.

Unbroken was the spirit – of many, far and wide:
within their hearts a courage, that nought could brush aside.
Immunity was now the word that people yearned to say.
Yet, shining through the fog of news, it seemed so far away.

Cautious though we were at first, a hazy dream took shape ...
that over the horizon comes a possible escape.
Optimistic thoughts took hold within each anxious mind.

Could it be true that science ... might rescue humankind?

Trustful that a bright new dawn would soon be on its way,
we persisted in our efforts to keep all harm at bay.
Young people may, in future years, look back with jaundiced eye;
but never will, I hope, forget the many who did die.

History is a teacher, to which we should pay heed:
pandemics come and kill and maim, but eventually recede.
Each generation has its test, for each to pass or fail.
Will we be found deficient, or – through unity – prevail?

The answer to this question may take some time to come.
The risk is that we fracture, and in discord we succumb.
It's not through isolation that the world will say it's won,
but only with the foresight ... to see mankind as one.

Seaside Sweeper - R Dawson

I like sweeping up in this street. It's the road everyone walks down whenever they're going to the beach or the entertainments so I likes to keep it clean. I 'ear they're short of a 'tendant down the park and ride toilets. Them where you go down the steps. I might fancy that. I bet no-one drops chips and gravy there. And you don't need no sweeper cart, see, cos you can't get it down the steps. Trouble is, I like the sweeping.

Oops, nearly walked in that. I'd best get that up before anyone does: there, that's

better. At school, Mr. Simpson used to ask me to sweep the paths at playtime as he knew I liked it better. I wore them stickers he gave me like they was medals – well they was, 'good work', 'well done'. Them young uns in Health, Hygiene and Refuse Department wouldn't care a tiddlywink, you know, don't give no stickers. Well, En-vera-mental Health then. It means the same thing.

Look, chips and gravy everywhere. You can't sweep gravy and chips, they don't like it. In the end yer scuff the chips with yer shovel. Like that. Sometimes when I get home it's all I can smell, gravy – it's not like ciggy ends and all the drinks bottles. You get some funny stuff chucked in the street. I could open a shop with babies dummies. I once found a credit card - 'course, I handed it in, didn't I.

Just look at that old pair of knickers. I ask you. Right outside the chippy. Lying there in the street. Makes you wonder, and that's pollution that is. Who dropped them anyway? – well, I'm not handing *them* in. Into the cart.

I tell you, these young uns in Health, Hygiene and Refuse Department wouldn't do it like me. En-vera-mental-thingy then these days.

It's coming on to rain but this flooey jacket keeps me dry. They said there was a job at the Tourist office once, get me out of the cold and wet, giving out leaflets. I couldn't do that though, talking to people. I thought one day they'd give me the MBE, the Queen like. Services to brushing. I was going to pin it next to the council badge. I haven't got none of them school stickers left or I'd have one on now, cos you'd get respect with a sticker, let alone a medal from the Queen. I don't suppose ... no, well, I only thought, silly really.

Vera Mental said I needed help, hospital said I was an isolation schizoid. Me, schizoid, but I'm not dangerous, they said that. I just want to be alone to do the sweeping. There's no law against talking to myself, to be on my own too. I'm all alone, only need a brush.

Right, that's it for today. Take the cart back, then 'ome, nice, cuppa, TV on, fish and chips. Wonder if that Vera detective is on.

THE ULTIMATE ISOLATION - D Williams

Igor, Yuri and me, Volodymyr

Three Mig fighter pilots.

We are promoted and become Mig test pilots, flying the latest versions of the fighter.

We perform our duties well, survive and become Cosmonauts

.

Instructions are received giving the order in which we will take part in the series of planned attempts to circuit the earth in the Vostok Space Capsule

Vostok 1 Igor ,

Vostok 2 Volodymyr,

Vostok 3 Yuri.

We wait and train.

It is like waiting to speak to someone at a bank or the DHSS on the phone

‘Thank you for your patience

Your call is moving up the queue

All our advisers are very busy at the moment we will answer your call as soon as possible’

Igor in Vostok 1 is on the launch pad.

Fame, decoration, promotion, world travel and eventually comfortable retirement will be his if he achieves the planned orbit.

Disaster!

Conflagration, orange flame envelopes the rocket.

What they say about all men being cremated equal is not true

For those who are cremated whilst still living the experience is -----unspeakable.

I wonder if Igor had time to take his suicide pill before being incinerated?

Igor in Vostok 1 has been removed from history, the State does not fail, incidents like this are airbrushed away, they never happened.

You are moving up the queue

Now I am in Vostok 1

Take off is perfect, but radio contact with base fails completely.

The world fills the capsule’s window but is diminishing.

Vostok 1 has failed to go into orbit.

I am heading out to space.

Football, tennis ball, golf ball.

The small snack provided for two hours flight contains a couple of sosiska v teste

an apple and milk chocolate. **They** know I prefer plain, **they** know everything about me, the scars, where I was when I got them, how, my dental records (this is legitimate for any pilot) but for this, possibly my last journey, **they** give me milk chocolate. Do I eat these provisions or take my pill?

Space bound I know I won't return.

I eat the apple.

Probably I have already been 'airbrushed'

I am in an isolation previously unknown to man, but perhaps more bearable than the isolation one feels in a crowded room?

Coat button, shirt button, bright pinhead, ---- just part of the milkiness of the galaxy.

You are moving up the queue

Yuri - Vostok 1 (any other number might indicate failures)

I'll be too far away to see how you fare.

Good luck Comrade!

Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space on 18th April 1961 orbiting the Earth in just under ninety minutes

Tuna and Sweetcorn - L Harvey

Emily awoke from yet another restless nights sleep, through the gloomy darkness she could just make out her husband's face that was illuminated by the glow of his smartphone. Steve being the early riser that he is, was awake before her most mornings having had not much sleep himself. Emily arose with the same question as all other mornings.....

'What time is it?' she asked him, '7:15' he replied. As Emily shuffled herself up the bed she stretched a long deep stretch, 'I had that dream again, you know the one where I can't get into Tesco, I need to get in but they won't let me, when they eventually do, I just buy tins of Tuna! The trolley is full of Tuna!'. 'You don't eat Tuna' Steve said. 'I know but you do', 'You like Tuna and sweetcorn sandwiches' replies Emily. 'Yes I do get some' he answered. 'What do you think it means?' Emily asked her husband, with his face still lit by his phone. 'Doesn't really mean anything, I've always liked Tuna' replied Steve 'No! My dream, what do you think it means?' she asked, 'I don't know, maybe you're just worried about the next weekly shop, did you reserve a slot for tomorrow?' not even looking up from his phone to answer her, which was becoming the 'Norm' in their house the last few months. Emily could count on her hand the number of times she and Steve held entire conversations with each other while looking numbingly at their devices, they had become what Emily feared 'addicts' it felt like a losing battle, she felt however, that this was the only life line they had during this 3rd Lockdown. What else was there? Cooped up together like Hermit crabs, Hermit crabs with wifi. 'What time is it now?' Emily asked, '7:24, no 7:25' he said. Emily sighed, 'Are the kids awake', 'No' replied Steve. 'Good' she said quietly to herself. Emily loved her kids, but having them home 24/7, plus homeschooling them, was to Emily's conscience starting to wear thin on her patience. 'Are you doing a workout' Steve asked, pulling the quilt over her and replied 'No too cold', 'The heatings been on for an hour' he said, 'Oh, too hot then' Emily replied.

After three hours of homeschooling Emily felt the glum realisation that she would have to start the housework and finish the online shop. Emily sighed for the 15th time that morning, 'Right shopping first' thought Emily, 'Steve do you need razors?' she called out, 'No' Steve called back. 'Teabags, Apples, Oatmilk, Bread, Soap, Toilet Roll, Hand sanitiser, what else?' She thought, 'Doughnuts!! All important food of the gods, right I think that's everything, where's the checkout? Are you sure you want to checkout? The screen read, 'Yes' Said Emily checking out one last time. 'There, all done' she said, relaxing, closing the laptop. Suddenly gasping, 'Oh no I forgot the Tuna.'

ISOLATION - M Hambidge

Edward sat eating his breakfast thinking. Since the funeral, he had only seen Joe in the corner shop and no decent talking went on as masks against the coronavirus stopped him lip-reading. He sighed; Mavis had been his wife of 40 years. They had never been blessed with children, so the two of them lived for each other.

Now Edward was alone with nothing to look forward to and no-one to talk to. They had moved from Birmingham to Evesham and had only been living there for a month when Mavis had been taken. The doctor believed it was the stress of moving that brought on the heart attack.

He washed up and then thought about switching on the television, but lately he found the news upsetting so he decided against it. Actually he couldn't motivate himself at all. Living alone, with no friends near and no-one to talk to, caused him to feel quite sorry for himself. Being alone was soul destroying for a man who had been used to his wife at his side, and he sighed again, sinking back down in his armchair, pulling the blanket over him. The morning quiz show held no interest anymore as there was no-one there to discuss the answers with. There was no point in the afternoon film either, no-one with him to enjoy it with. He closed his eyes.

Yes, things were definitely different now alright and Edward felt as if his mind had seized up. His lack of concentration was stopping him enjoying so many things. Jigsaw puzzles, television, reading and even the classical music he loved held no pleasure for him now. Why didn't he want to do anything? When would his body feel like living again? When would he be taking proper walks, enjoying nature? The only thing he seemed to be doing more of was sleeping. Loneliness wasn't the word for this. It was despair that engulfed him now.

He was interrupted by the sound of the post arriving. It was a flyer saying "Are you alone? Would you like someone to call you for a chat?" "Do you need any help or shopping?" Edward's eyes opened wide and he gulped. "Ring this number to hear a friendly voice and your neighbourhood volunteers will help in any way they can. We can get through this if we all pull together, so give us a try!" Edward gave the first smile for weeks. Being alone was causing him to feel sorry for himself. His positive nature had changed to a negative one. All his once loved interests had been replaced by lethargy and boredom. Sorrow, desperation and despair were his only companions and he wasn't living, just existing.

He thought of his dear Mavis. What would she tell him to do? He knew the answer and smiled. She would want him to never give in, but help himself by reaching out to others. After all, people need people, and a problem shared is a problem halved!

Isolation in Belper: a fantasy - A Rapkin

1 – 2 – 3 – 4

we can't take it any more

2 – 4 – 6 – 8

we refuse to isolate

barefaced in balaclavas,
a chanting crowd of thirty or so,
youths mainly, some women and older mavericks,
moved down King Street

to avoid them, wearers of masks
shrank back into shop doorways:
pandemic pandemonium,
the Belper News would headline it

the physical encounter with police
they may have been craving
was slow in coming,
and to sceptical onlookers,
they seemed collectively isolated,
aimlessly milling about

a rough-throated spokesman with loud-hailer
repeated their slogan,
self-infection, not self-isolation:
they were HIP, the Herd Immunity Party,
hoping to host a rave in the park that night

when the police arrived in numbers
–shields and batons, horses,
water-cannon, rubber bullets–
a few shop windows were tokenly broken,
a few arrests made,
but they all soon dispersed, sheep in wolves' clothing

those prosecuted used as defence
the mental stress of isolation,
but still claimed, through immunity to the threat of death,
they, as common herd,
were the progressive voice of the people

The Clock - E Marshall

I watch the wall clock tick. Just enough time to get the kettle boiling. But I don't get up. Instead, I think about the clock. My husband made it by hand, you know. It must be about fifty odd years old, this clock. Probably a birthday present, or maybe it was for an anniversary. He'd said, "It's not the most handsome thing, but it'll do". Just like my husband. Theodore to you. But he was my Teddy. A practical man. Rest in peace.

We had a son. Timothy to you. But he is my Timmy. Just like his father. Practical. He was ever such a good lad. Though not one bit fond of the clock. Said it were a hideous, loud thing. I agreed. But I never did say so. Though, it's grown on me. I used to say to our Timmy, "Put your head down to your studies, then you can get a good job and earn enough money to move out", because the clock weren't moving, so he'd have to go. And he did. Our Timmy got top grades, a scholarship to some medical school and became a doctor of sorts, you know. He always was too good for the family and our clock.

Timmy left and started his own family without me. But I was alright. I had neighbours. We used to stand at the front gates and natter on until the clock struck some late hour. And I had my job. I was a dinner lady, you know, for Timmy's old school. The children were little darlings, occasionally. But I retired, me knees thought it was about time.

One day, the council put me and the clock into a bungalow on the other side of town. It's decent. Though I don't know the new neighbours. Too cold these days to stay outside. And me old neighbours never visit. Don't blame them, their knees are as knackered as mine. And Timmy says he's too busy to see me. I understand. Besides, I have the clock for company. So, I spend most days just watching it tick.

The other week, I found Timmy at the front door. "It's been months mum, you alright?", he'd said. I froze. I guess I'd forgotten how to talk. I hadn't spoke to a soul for months. He thought I couldn't hear him. I never did have the best hearing, you see. He hadn't seen me for near a year, but after that call, he came the next day. So, I played deaf again. It had brought Timmy back home once already. Being a doctor, he prescribed my deafness with weekly visits. He should be here any minute.

Though we can't chat anymore, not being able to hear him, it's nice to have him around more often. It's like having Teddy here again. He never realises that I know he snatches the batteries from the clock while I make the cuppas. He never could stand its ticking. I guess I'll let him.

Isolation Rows - N Davey

Into the glowing blue-green screen I peer,
Seeking solace from some stateless ether.
On film, by contrast, by green-screen appears
Life, or something like, bringing together
Action-setting-superstar. It's clever:
They pretend to be heroic - as if
In beating villains (vanquished forever)
Or solving riddles from cursed hieroglyphs,
Nemeses will by them be banished from real-life.

Solitary Saturday matinees
On BBC2: all is black and white.
Lines drawn between characters; "simpler" days:
All resolved - big tick - and morally "right".
Today, we choose greyscale: although more byte,
It allows for subtle shades and nuance.
Once, we would've been sure we'd win the fight;
Now we look at odds, put things in balance:
In Pandemic Times, learn to calculate the chance.

On-line and off, life is technicolour.
Like illuminations from a holy book,
A paradise of promises hover:
"Technology is wonderful" its hook.
Into the glowing blue-green screen eyes look,
Openly gaze on a virtual brave
New world that has such people; sense their "luck"
In being born in this world where they have
Such ways to avoid Covid's first, second, third wave.

Late to the white-heat of technology,
Accepting my seat at its interface,
Teaching becomes techno-pedagogy:
Inform, instruct; encourage, inculcate.
Online, remote learning to educate -
Not a close-knit classroom full of scholars.
In time my screen comes alive - half past eight:
Strange hieroglyphs, icons, avatars
Or (bizarrely, less human) initial letters.

As solo students make our meeting,
Tutoring starts with a salutation:
I'm tuned to the timbre of the greeting
Of each faceless voice in quick rotation.
Now we congregate from every station:
In Bolsover, Brampton, Holymoorside,
Staveley, Newbold, Hasland, Walton, Tapton
Options are taken to cross this divide:
Like the first day of term, of school, of life outside.

Tentative first steps in techno-spaces
Imitate first steps in their nurseries:
Opening mouth/microphone first day is
Not for the faint-hearted/introverted.
Innate inhibitions become insecurities.
Sent emojis suggesting emotions
Of J humour, ❤️ hope, J happiness;
Lying by unopened invitations
And repeatedly posed but unanswered questions.

Isolated voices initiate talk,
Overcoming over-powering reserve:
Nervously, hands raise above the bulwark,
Indicating ideas to preserve
Somewhere within a cyber-space server.
Our college community now changing,
Like superstars - YouTube influencers -
All brought alive via "Start Recording".
This communication serves to pause the longing.

Optimism grows - it's now sustaining,
Nurtured like seed of Apple or Acorn:
Imagination rebooted, making
Symbiotic the hope from both sides born.
Over their off-spring's shoulders parents see form
Letters, a lexicon, literally
An acknowledgement through strange cuneiform
That isolation breeds - ironically -
Independence (+ ICT facility).

No console or computer consoles like

Interaction; no screen chat like this is
Set to “open hearts” even if “open-mic”.
Only the lonely know the way it is:
Loneliness isn’t being alone; it’s
A state of mind – in crowds or lockdown - which
Truly, we realise, isolates us.
Isolation makes us reflective:
Opens our eyes and hearts to a new perspective.

Isolation - P Holmes

The hardest part is being apart from you.
The days are long, the nights are cold.
To be in the house all alone...
Not allowed to see you - nobody to talk, no voices you can hear –
Only your own. You feel alone

You start to feel that you're cracking up.
Panic attacks start to come more often... then you start to shake.
You feel cold and you're alone.
You grab your hands to take away the pain, you wrap your arms around yourself to
ease the pain...
All you want is someone to say hello and end the pain of being alone.

But nobody is there
You finally drop to sleep.
For now, while you dream, there is silence.
Someone *is* there... you feel happiness, laughter and joy.
You smile while you're asleep...

The one you love is there - he's smiling at you.
Your family and friends are all around you.
You begin to laugh, cry and they're hugging you.
You feel fine.
The dream seems to last for ages. You don't want it to end because it feels so real. You
want to hold on to what you have for just a little longer.
It seems so real but slowly, comes to an end...
Suddenly you're wide awake. Once more, you feel alone.

You go for a walk; the sun is out, the sky a bright blue.
You watch the birds up in the sky. They're flying high.
You hear the robins singing away
To find a mate just for the day.

The flowers are in bloom. They make you smile.
You take in a deep breath. You smell their fragrance and think of happy things... when you
were with your family and dearest friends.
Each deep breath is a memory flowing back to the good times that you had and
good times that you shared with your loved ones.

You realise the walking is good.
It clears your mind in the woods...
A chance to focus on the positive.
You feel that isolation is so sad but

Times will get better, people will be glad

The days to come will be brighter
The moods will come lighter
The time to see family will come and
Your sad heart will blossom
As light at the end is near
Your thoughts will become more clear.
You will get to hug the ones you love
Fear and pain you will rise above
Fear and pain a distant past
Freedom will come at last.

Isolation - D Hidson

I'm lonely but no one seems to care.
Neighbours get in their car and pass by.
My children are scattered far and wide.
So I sit in my window and stare
at a bird singing in a tree.
But no one seems to care about me.

When I was young I nursed others.
Gently I lifted them on their pillows.
Sometimes I'd have a little chat.
Oh how I wish someone would pass by
then maybe they would see
how lonely life is for me.

I sit hour after hour in my chair
wondering why no one seems to care.
I've outlived most of my friends
so no one to share memories with.
No more do I here the turn of a key.
Oh God please, please call me.

Isolation - G Byrom-Smith

The sun rises.
The sun sets.
The stars shine.
The birds sing.
The blossom blows.

But darkness dims our spring;
shaking bones,
rattling windows,
tapping doors.
Unseen, unquiet,
tainting air,
tainting touch.

Dates pass unheeded.
Birthdays uncelebrated.
Days merge into weeks.
Sun shines into
small squares of the
outside world,
viewed through windows.

Emboldened birds build nests,
butterflys flurry,
bees ever busy.
Car noise,
plane noise,
the relentless soundtrack
to our lives -
ceased.
Birds song soars,
bees hum.

Quietness our new constant,
people, poles apart,
queue like sentries
on desolate streets.
Our world made
strange, eery, unreal
by silence.

A LULLABY FROM HOME (Shortlisted) - J King

A diamond-white winter moon hung high in the sky when Sofía eventually opened her bedroom door.

Her lady had been querulous and demanding all day, and Sofía was tired.

Normally, however hard the day had been, however cantankerous her ward, the sight of the little

Mexican flag and the family photos on her chest-of-drawers would spring a smile to Sofía's face, the thoughts of a difficult day already fading.

But tonight, Sofía was tired; tired of the woman's entitled demands; tired of the perplexing language, tired of winter's bone-chilling cold, and tired of being alone, isolated... in England.

A tear pushed itself down her cheek, followed by another, and another – and Sofía wept.

She'd known she'd made the right decision in taking this live-in carer's job abroad, the wages good, living costs nil. She knew, too, that the monthly transfer of much of her earnings was vital to the family finances at the moment, and that her work was highly valued, but tonight none of that seemed enough.

Some other nights she'd dreamt of Julio, Angelica and little Luis, and of warm evenings in the cantinas, eating, chatting, laughing, listening to the Mariachi bands. Sometimes she'd dream of the mountains surrounding her city, with its parks and bustling avenidas and she'd wake, the mornings after these familiar, reassuring dreams, happier, knowing the days away from home would soon come to an end.

But tonight, Sofía was tired, and tonight felt different.

So it was that, despite the frosty air, Sofía pushed open her bedroom window, better to see the moon, for tonight she would send a message of hope via its familiar face, that face soon to look down on her home, and all she loved.

And then it was she heard it, a strange fox-smooth, fox-soft voice, and surely... it was singing in Spanish?

Leaning out she realised the singer below her.

She looked down to see two eyes looking up at her, eyes shining diamond-white in the moonlight.

And Sofía heard the song, and she knew the song, and she sang the song, and they sang the song together, each singer looking into the other's eyes, eyes shining diamond-white in the moonlight.

And as they came to the final chorus, a cloud passed across the moon, and the eyes disappeared.

The next day, Sofía wasn't aware that as she worked, now contentedly, she was half-singing, half-humming the song, until her lady, much calmer that day, said, "Sofía, that's a curious little song you're singing – it's lovely." and though barely audibly, she joined in, and as together they sang the lullaby about hopes and dreams, the moon... and a fox, a smile spread across the wrinkled face, from where her eyes twinkled, like diamonds, white in the moonlight.

Staying Put - D Wells

'The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in seeing with new eyes.' (Marcel Proust).

March & April 2020, the world comes to a halt. The unthinkable happening, global lockdowns, plague, death, the world as we know it at an end? Living in the tiny hamlet of Mapleton in middle England, the atmosphere is surreal. Observing the heron embracing the eerie solitude of the water meadows, eventually setting off on lazy flight. The distant church bells calling but not for service.

Views across our fields fan over Mapleton and Okeover: An archetypal classic 18th century scene, barely changed for some 260 years. Life here as steady as the flowing river Dove. The Okeover Arms sign proclaims the Okeover family motto-*Esto Vigilans*' (*'Be Vigilant'*) and we are. The world in turmoil yet here a sense of permanence. Was it ever thus during the two world wars? Tempting to think the horrors were avoided, but War Memorials in local churches tell another story.

Another sublime spring day. The Lady's Smock, arrived on Tuesday. Known as *the Cuckoo flower*, for supposedly flowering the day the Cuckoo is first heard. Next morning, Wednesday 15 April, we hear our first Cuckoo. Two weeks later, first sighting of swallows arriving from Africa. Absolute joy watching them circling over Okeover Bridge, quite frenzied after their six-week journey.

Riverbanks full of purple loosestrife, butterbur, jack-in-the -pulpit and wild garlic. Copses awash with forget-me-nots, bluebells, primrose and sweet violets. It's now May and lo and behold-through the rather mystical dappled light, glimpses of *'May-Bells'*. The most emblematic flower of the month, *Lily of the Valley*, with their beautiful pendant bell-shaped flowers, signifies *'return to happiness'*. Blossomtime, fleeting symbols of renewal and hope. On the rolling slopes, the May Hawthorn wraps up the display as if with a white ribbon. Even the Ash, a notorious late riser from winter slumbers, reawakens: *'The Venus of the Woods*, eminently graceful.

Barely three hundred yards from home, the sylvan Dove provides solace and balm as we traipse along the banks, endlessly trying to comprehend what is going on in Covid world. Each stretch of the river has its own melody. As the water flows by, so do the days. We rarely see a soul here at the best of times. Accompanied now by a symphony of birdsong and faint wind rustling in the trees.

2020 fading away. The mad zest of Spring and early Summer and the autumnal glories now belong to the past and photo albums. Leaves of the tulip trees on the Okeover estate tremble no longer, the ash trees past frantic dancing on stormy nights. Our swallows have given up on us, instead odd screeches of Canada geese on missions overhead. Frost threatens, a time for hibernation, snow on its way. Stark trees form silhouettes in a muted landscape of faint russet tones. Hugging the riverbank along to Okeover Bridge, hardy

alders bear beautiful mulberry catkins. In our isolation, we have never noticed such wonders before.

The Lonely Soldier - D McAra

He was alone, afraid, very afraid. The sound of war was all around, explosions nearby and his best friend lay dead beside him. He could clearly hear the shouts of the fast-approaching enemy and the voices of those who were closest.

What was he to do? What could he do? He thought of his family at home in Hamburg so he prayed that they were safe and then raised a hand above the edge of the shell hole and waited for the end that would surely come.

A face appeared above him, grim and dirty but not threatening and, in that moment, the soldier knew that he may be saved, perhaps he was not going to die today after all.

‘Stand up! Keep your hands where I can see them and come out slowly!’

Whilst the soldier did not understand the language he knew what he had to do and obeyed meekly. Relief engulfed him but, as he turned to look at his friend for the last time, he felt cold, deeply sad and very alone. Lost.

Things happened quickly after that. He was marched roughly back through the lines and wretchedly found himself on a ship to England where he was to be incarcerated as a prisoner of war for the rest of the conflict. No more fighting for him but many days, months and years of boredom and loneliness.

There were work parties and, during time out of the camp when he was working on the land, he would occasionally receive a smile from a villager, but mostly he was met with grimaces and contempt. He tried to stay positive but the overwhelming feeling was of emptiness and longing for better days

Then came the news, One cold winter’s day he was told that his wife and two sons had been killed in the bombing. Nothing more, just that they had gone and that was that.

Dark days and long nights followed and the soldier was devoid of any thought other than desperation until, on a fine day in May, the war came to an end, he was going to be freed and repatriated to his homeland.

He didn’t go home, there was nothing to go home for. So, he stayed.

He ventured into the village and found work as a labourer with a building firm and there he stayed for years, living in an old caravan in the corner of the yard surrounded by bricks and timber.

Over time he became a familiar figure in his Wehrmacht greatcoat and was accepted simply for what he was: the soldier who stayed. His needs were simple and he asked for nothing.

They found him one morning as if asleep. Cold, unstimulating and finally at peace.

On the small table was a thick bundle of banknotes and a scribbled page which simply read: 'This has been my home for thirty-five years and you are all my family, please use this money for good things, your friend, Hans'.

My Lockdown Visitor - M Doolan

The only visitor I had in Lockdown was a tiny baby mouse.
Everything was so quiet he wandered into the house.
He had a lovely time with me playing a game of hide and seek,
but sadly, he needed to go outside and find Mum.
He was not an animal I could Keep.

I picked him up in my katcha bug usually reserved for bees,
Which shows how very small he was indeed!
And let him go on the grass outside my kitchen door,
So, he could return to Mum and his garden friends for evermore.

The next day working in the garden I heard a rustling from the hedge,
As he scurried out and back again through the flower bed.
It was as my friend had come to thank me for saving his life,
But mice grow up so quickly he probably now has a couple of kids,
A mortgage and a wife!

ISOLATION - P Hunter

The room contained four generations of women.

Time was suspended, a whole lifetime of memories absorbed the last three of these generations, each with a different aspect of the life of the first, but each as important to each of them in its own way.

The one thought in common was that those moments were slipping away, with no more memories to be made to add to this collection.

Each precious moment that remained was slowly slipping away, to remain etched in each of their minds. The Matriarch that held each of the other women's hearts was to leave a void that could not be filled. Other memories would invade this space but could never replace those that would remain with each forever.

As a precious life slipped away from this earth, isolation engulfed those left behind, lost without the first, each alone with their own private grief.

The presence of the soul was strong, but no earthly presence did prevail. Only at a time unspecified would they meet again. Until then, each would remain isolated from her.

As I walk along the dark silent streets, the emptiness I feel within rises to the surface of my mind, memories of all the years emerge flooding the void left by your departure from this earth.

As the darkness starts to fade, I look at the crescent moon and feel the presence of your soul. A comforting feeling envelopes me, as if you are contained within, the stars that offer company for the moon I feel are the souls of those gone before, loved ones who now gain from your presence. One day I will meet you there.

The isolation that envelopes my soul lifts as I imagine you all there, in the moon and stars your spirits shine, lighting up my life till I will meet you again.

The sky slowly brightens, my spirits rise along with the sun, my feelings of isolation fade. Thoughts of daily rituals pervade, for now I am needed here, to nurture the loved ones that remain.

I will gain strength from the wisdom you instilled, a legacy to pass on.

Isolation put aside, through the loved ones left you will live on.

The world is shrouded in silent snow, the moon highlights the beauty of the diamond like flakes, reminding me that though alone, your spirit is still with me lighting up my soul.

Grief cuts my heart like a knife, and stings my eyes, revealing treasured memories locked inside.

I bathe in my reverie, cherishing you there, tormented that our time has come to an end, though I know that while I remain, you will live forever in my heart and soul, till our spirits meet again I will hold you there.

While I am here you will never be forgotten. You were the part of me that made me whole.

The Smile (Shortlisted) - B Saxton

I sit in an armchair and wonder what today will bring, probably the same as yesterday and similar to tomorrow. I am surrounded by four gaudy walls and pink flamboyant swags and tails. The intensity is overwhelming, it unnerves me and I cannot settle. I close my eyes to help ease my rising panic; a barrier to the reality that I have come to fear.

Suddenly, a warm hand touches my shoulder, a reassuring hand perhaps, I cannot be sure. I open my eyes with trepidation.

“Are you O.K. Catherine?” a voice asks.

A voice that I do not recognise from a face that I do not know.

How does she know my name? I ask myself, as she speaks with familiarity.

No. I am not O.K., I silently scream.

“Yes,” I utter.

I just smile, the one I do when I am confused as to what to do or say next. The one that masks my insecurities for now but which will inevitably betray me with my vacant gaze. United they will speak volumes, spread the word that I am not always here. She removes her hand and walks away. I feel alone.

I recall that I am Catherine Mary Morgan. I am eighty years old or maybe eighty-one, it doesn't really matter. I scour the room and see faces; three dozing, one reading and one staring. She is staring at me. She offers an exaggerated wave and a toothless grin. I fail to respond.

“Catherine, it's Winnifred,” she calls from across the room.

I just smile.

“She's a funny one,” she mouths to the old man sitting next to her with his head buried in a book.

Does she mean me? I wonder.

I feel uncomfortable and avert my eyes to the black screen that dominates the far corner of the room; blank and lifeless, two of a kind. Now lucid and alone with my thoughts, I start to think. I am drawn in to the void where my thoughts spiral towards what lies ahead. I envisage the time when my world will diminish, as will I, slowly but surely. Once the life and soul I will become the soul with no life, unable to reach out or let others reach in. My lonely existence will be teased by sporadic flashes of happier times, before I am engulfed by the tsunami; memories drowned and washed away, an existence of isolation being the sole survivor. I fear what I will become. I sense the tsunami is rumbling, gathering momentum. My head is now aching and I am feeling weary. I know that I will face a gargantuan battle, one in which I will have to fight alone, one in which the odds will never be stacked in my favour, one in which isolation will triumph. I just smile.

Untitled - S Davies

“Work in isolation” they said. “It’ll be good” they said. “You’ll be able to focus, and you’ll get far, far more work done” they said. As if there was a choice.

True, she had in fact managed to achieve a lot more without the distraction of replacements, particularly with not having to get to know new people. Bizarrely, having colleagues or even friends arriving and working alongside could be a real hindrance, as there was the normal human need to reconnect and simply catch up, which of course led to less productivity. Although, being able to talk to someone in the same room would have been simply lovely, and, dare it be said, *normal*.

Normality ended when the virus took over. Ridiculously contagious and unbelievably varied in its symptoms, its deathrate low but significant (especially for the dead, dying and their families), and its effect on social behaviour catastrophic. Masks, physical contact minimised, obsessive hygiene and social distancing resulted in disaster for all but the chronically shy and the most determined of hermits.

Not seeing her twins was the worst. Spending time away from them for long periods was just a part of the job, but not to this extent. At least they’re older now, she thought; when they were little the changes in them were daily, and very exciting. Completely unplanned, her husband often quipped that “one of them was unplanned, I just don’t know which one”. As it turned out, they were both overjoyed to complete their family, and her husband was luckily able to provide most of the at-home parenting. High flyer that she was (is), her achievements and further potential could not be ignored. Degrees and other qualifications in subjects that made most people’s eyes glaze over, as well as having to kick down barriers of race and gender on a daily basis, meant that there was no way she was going to pass up the opportunity of a lifetime. The opportunity that led her here, ahead of so many others.

Now, a period of reflection. Yes. Reflection indeed. What should have been the pinnacle of her career was in fact more likely to be the crescendo, and quite possibly her legacy. She always wanted to make a contribution to humanity, and to history. Academically she had already managed this, as her ideas had enhanced science and technology within (and beyond) her own sphere of expertise. As a human being, isolated from family and friends, hers was a story that might inspire and enthuse. A story of stoicism in the face of ending up marooned.

She placed her right hand against the clear Perspex, covering up eastern Europe and most of Russia. She stared down at the British Isles, trying to make out the location of her life, but as usual it was mostly obscured by cloud. She turned back to the oxygen monitor, lamenting the fact that the time remaining was measured not in hours, or minutes, but in seconds.

Nothing lasts forever - P Scales

The sensation of travelling in time was, pretty much, as H. G. Wells had described it: the rotation of sun and moon accelerated until they became constant circles of light on a grey background; familiar things disappeared, unfamiliar things flashed in and out of existence.

Whereas Wells' traveller sat in a velvet buttoned armchair surrounded by a brass framework decorated with filigree mouldings, confronted by a dashboard of whizzing dials, switches and twinkling quartz and crystal, our traveller was contained in a sleek, seamless pod with a single touchscreen for information. Aesthetic and design considerations aside, the form of the conveyance was largely irrelevant.

The time machine came to rest – in some place, at some time. He could see nothing outside but a uniform grey. The thin band of screen appeared to be misted. After necessary checks and procedures, he clambered out of his machine to survey the surroundings. There was nothing: no ground; no sky; no sea; no objects; no living things; no dead things. There were no things of any kind. There was nothing – and it was the colour of Tupperware.

There was nothing beneath his feet. He might have been falling but there was no way of knowing. Falling is only a problem if there is something you are falling towards, especially something hard that might break your bones or kill you, and you can see things rushing past you.

Because there were no objects, no physical or visible phenomena, there was no distance because there were no things between which there could be distance.

Because time is related to space and movement, he could not tell how much time had elapsed or even if time was a useful concept anymore. There didn't appear to be any space for time to happen in.

Returning to his machine he set the mechanism for five thousand years into the future. Motors purred; the digital time-elapsed indicator accelerated rapidly. Sitting in the machine was rather like being in a stationary vehicle in dense fog. There was no sensation of movement or change. There were no things to travel between, so notions of forward or backward movement were irrelevant.

In what might, or might not, have been a brief period of time, five thousand years elapsed. Again, the traveller got out.

There was nothing: no ground; no sky; no sea; no objects; no living things; no dead things. There were no things of any kind. There was nothing – and it was the colour of Tupperware. Tupperware, it seemed, was the colour of nothing.

Several subsequent movements, or perhaps non-movements, in his machine produced the same outcome. He could no longer travel in time because there was no time and there were no places. There was only nothing – and nothing lasts forever.

Tarts and Vicars and the not so lost dog - P Brentnall

It was still dark as I made my way down the stone steps to my car, the cold wind sent shivers down my spine, I drew my coat closer to my body, starting my car and switching on the headlights I made my way to the dairy. When I arrived at work it was very busy with the clattering of milk crates and the loading of produce onto milk floats. I finished my loading and went for a cup of tea and spoke to my fellow colleagues who were sitting nearby. My friend came over to invite me to a themed Vicars and Tarts party the following night, 'that sounds like fun', I replied. At that I finished my tea and decided to make a start, I drove from the dairy down the dark quiet streets.

When I arrived at the start of my round it was starting to get light, in the distance I could make out a little dog sitting in the road. A small round dog not looking very happy. I stopped the vehicle and the dog seemed pleased to see me. It had a collar and lead but sadly no identity tag. I decided to put it on the float and take it to the police station at the end of my shift. I put the heater on and there it sat enjoying both the view and the ride. Later, I shared my sandwiches and a bottle of gold top with the dog. On the way home I stopped at the police station and was met by a police officer, I explained about finding the dog, he stated they would send the dog to the RSPCA. A couple of days later I called in at the police station and the same officer greeted me. When I enquired about the dog he smiled. He said 'you had only left the police station 5 minutes when a lady came in to report her dog as being stolen. She had left him at the top of the drive while she checked she had locked her door and he had disappeared' the Dog and owner were reunited once more and it seems not so lost after all.

The next night we were dressed up and on the way to the party. My wife reminded me we needed to take a bottle. I nipped into to a local shop and bought some wine. On return, someone had parked very close to my car making it difficult to move out of the space. While trying to manoeuvre, I clipped the car behind. A large unshaven man started walking toward me with a string vest and a pencil behind his ear. As he got closer his mood suddenly changed and to my surprise he smiled at me and said "that's alright reverend, no harm done" Luckily he did not look in my car to see my wife dressed like a lady of the night. Phew 'a lucky escape, I said to my wife.

Grey shadows in between - K Jackson

Too much to feel and
no certainties close the gaps

ripping ordinary apart.
What the hell even words choke.
Here alone. Beached whale.
Driftwood.
Vanishing point

vanished with nothing
left at all except a new strain of dis-ease.

What shall we talk about?
Familiar strangenesses?
Who stands idyllic
in your memory?

Schoolkid to his corner
bent inwards
wave-riding ocean in his head.
Sharp-toothed laughter prowls the shore.

Gown and choir
and the cross ever booming.

And again now,
bent inwards, cornered,
trying not to inhale fear.
Grey sky gnarly, leaning in dangerously.
Heart ingrowing.
The internal bleed.

Some long number. Was someone's dad, grand-dad, neighbour. Died last Monday, breath stolen.
He was Jim - is Jim – is a different Jim – gone – departed - gone from - gone back - over.
Jim who was - is - something else now - is –

A field, a hole.
Round the hole figures
gravity caught. Ten only.
In the hole flowers.
The flowers weigh
soil's infalling

clumsy
plucky
lucid.

Like tears
cool to silence
to a field
subdued behind
memory's gate.

Don't tell me you're not afraid.
Like driftwood today. (Don't look down.)
Who are you?
Love again. Useless as sunlight.
Nowhere to settle in myself.
Nowhere to play. Let me

see your hands.
(Don't look down). Here is a ring
on your finger, golden
as a lover's gaze
sacred to the dance.
Priceless.
But not enough.

Who made it so?
All of it poured into
small lives, one
small life betting on another?

The low gate in
the wall. Find it.
Go through. Within
an enchanted garden
long with ivy
high with elms
innocent
of any window.

What precious
would you bury here?
Here where summer's
sweet wine light lifts us
a finger's breadth
above the grass
and suspends us?

Moon is leaving us.
It is a fact.
Slip sliding away
till we will be left
here alone
unshielded
to confront the all.

Shivers like the harmonics of an owl.
What is moon without light?
What am I without loving?
A still life? A life, still?
Driftwood?

Now a beached whale.
Who would want
longer life in this ugly?

Walls pile up like felled forests
glory stranded into smaller pieces
and no peace in the unkind streets.
Is this the best way?
Stabbing pain for a second of soul.

Both sides of the wall
we die just the same.

I will look down, I must. You
know how much I liked it
when your hands woke me
in the mornings. You were
my mornings. Garden
shivering with birdsong light.

And now?
In this moment,
this clumsy lucid dead-centre moment
grasp freedom with the whale
one spirit
one wave booming.

Bird is air dancing -
whale is water dancing -
we are dust dancing -
love is the dance
and it still goes on.

CONTROLLED

Untitled - J Leonard

The island hunkered amidst grey, white-flecked waves. Not a sceptred Shakespearean jewel set in a silver sea but a hunk of granite, shingle-shored and barren. At its centre, a great boulder; a stone heart for a jagged angled archipelago. Sitting atop the boulder, the island's singular, similarly jagged occupant.

Though it didn't do to dwell on the past, Gilbert could not help but remember when the island had been more... 'alive.' There had been a tree once, he thought. Maybe it had been a palm tree. Perhaps there had been coconuts. He wasn't certain; it was funny what time alone did to the memory. Anyway, even if there had been coconuts, he wouldn't have eaten them.

Desiccated. That was the word. A school recipe he'd been forced to follow, many years ago.

'Now, top your biscuits with the desiccated coconut,' his home-ec teacher had insisted.

'I don't want to,' Gilbert had replied.

After that, the kids had called him 'Coconuts.' That had seemed to go on for years.

But now, there was no school in sight. In fact, there was very little in sight. Just the listless ripple of the iron sea and the dappled greyness of the stones he called home.

Standing, he limped painfully across the sharp-stoned shore and plucked a fist-sized rock from the ebbing tide. Like the others, a single word was etched into one of its many angled faces. This one said, 'Trust.' And, like the others, he weighed it in his hand, considering how far he could cast it into the dreary depths. The stone arched over the implacable ocean, spinning free from his grasp. The memory, like the stone, disappeared beneath the surface, leaving barely a ripple and less of the island.

Of course, it hadn't always been an island. Gilbert pondered the stone heart, the boulder stubbornly holding its place as the seas churned around him. There had been causeways and bridges, a great land mass. There had been long, languid summer days, lying in meadows; fishing in twisting streams. A girl. Three girls. With sweet-smelling skin and long, lustrous hair, doe-eyed and beautiful. He'd kissed them all. Separately of course, interspersed by the cataclysmic events that had eroded much of the island's former beauty. Funny how each stone cast into the sea made room for another painful memory.

'Hey!'

Great. Now he was imagining things. Voices, how clichéd.

'Hey! I'm talking to you!'

Gilbert lifted another stone and studied the single word, 'Hope.'

'I hope you're not intending to throw that,' came the voice once again.

Turning, Gilbert was surprised to see a wild-haired, weather-beaten boy staring at him from a rowing boat, bobbing just metres from the shore of his island.

'You nearly hit me before,' he continued, 'You could have sunk my boat.'

Gilbert contemplated the stone in his hand.

'You look a little stuck,' he said, 'Would you like to climb on board? You could help me row.'

'I don't think I know how any more,' Gilbert replied.

A different bed (Shortlisted) - U Ochu

She was alone. Sitting in her bedroom, weeping. It had happened again, and she didn't know why. One moment she was fine, laughing, feeling good. Then someone would say something and it would swallow her.

She hugged her knees. Held tight. She felt so miserable, so not understood, so isolated.

Of course she wasn't. There was a whole world of people out there. But right now, she was not one of them. Not just because she was here, all by herself, in her bedroom with tears staining her pillow. But because she was different. Different from other people she knew, different from everybody else. She felt different.

She didn't understand why this was so. Why couldn't she be more like the others? Why couldn't she look like, walk like, talk like, breathe, like everybody else?

Sometimes she would forget. Sometimes she was just by herself and not thinking about what was wrong with her. Just being in the moment, concentrating on the task at hand, forgetting herself, feeling good. Every so often she would interact with people and have fun, enjoy herself. She loved those moments. Those moments when all was well with the world. Her world. Those moments where she was just She. Happy.

Shakingly she inhaled deeply. The sniffing had stopped.

The memory of that feeling had given her a bit of relief. Hugging herself gave a bit of comfort. She pulled up the covers and laid her head on the pillow. Her bed was hers. Her bed didn't care who she was or what she was like. Her bed didn't judge her looks, didn't judge her behaviour. It was just a bed. No opinion, no judgement, no mind of its own. It merely stood there, always being a bed. Would the bed ever doubt itself? Suddenly she had to laugh. She imagined herself as a bed. Then she pictured her friends as beds. Her family.

She lay on her back, a grin tickling her face. She could feel the giggle in her throat. The idea was so silly! In her minds eye she pictured the beds. They were twirling through her head, talking, walking the streets, making breakfast. Some were made, some unkempt. Some with fluffy pillows and a downy duvet. Some with practical drawers, some covered with toys. Some big, some small. They were all different beds! She had never thought of beds that way, but every bed had something to distinguish it from the other beds. Wouldn't it be awkward if every bed was identical? How would you know which one was yours?

She sat up. Maybe, there was something good at being different? Maybe it was even the way things were supposed to be? She exhaled. She had been holding her breath on this revelation. This new idea made her feel excited. This made sense! Being different made sense. It is the natural way of things.

And there she was, on her own, feeling part of the world again.
Covers move again.

CONTROLLED

Untitled - A Simpson

Eyes open again.
Yes - dark again.
The walls crash into me.
Submerging me as the ceiling joins in the fun.
Suffocating me.

Radio on "Today".
Covers over me for safety.
Hiding from my reality.
Items clutched desperately.
Eyes open to my silent world.
Light creeps round my room.
Like in some forgotten tomb.

"Get up" I say.
"Don't want to" I shout.
Covers wrapped around me.
Crystals and his handkerchief held still.
Walls and ceiling retreated to normality.
"Breathe just breath" I say.
What day is it?
Is it Monday and History class?
Check the time and phone.
Up I get.

Will they contact me?
Bathroom calls then the kitchen it will be.
I walk in silence.
Perhaps today?
Stomach churns.

Down the stairs to tea and toast.
First breakfast it is.
Cereal prepared.
Second breakfast that will be.
Check the phone on return to bed.
Nothing, surprise - not!

Radio on.
Light on.
Silence gone at least.
Another day in toy town.
Another day in suffocation, isolation I think they call it.

“Get dressed”! Why?
“Wash and teeth”! Why?
“What the hell else is there to do?” True.
Just do something. Please!
Clothes on, curtains opened.
The world is there?
Window opened to dogs barking.

I bark back to have a conversation.
I laugh!

Fresh air is good.
Lungs fill and empty.
Bored already and its 10 am.
Window closed world gone.
It is even raining now. Great! Not!
Bring some snow and really make my day!
And it does!

No running away now!
Eyes well up at the noise of a plane.
“Take me” I shout. Please!
To escape!
Freedom I think it was called.
“Days that are no more....” Housman wrote.
Freedom gone suffocation left.

Downstairs.
Door to fresh air!
Stomach churns again!
Turning away “it will pass” I say.
To the sitting room.
Past photographs of normality.
Please no TV!
I do. What else?

Fed up and sad before – worse now.
Waiting is all there is.
Waiting for what?
Vaccine? Yes.
“Life?” Yes.
Yet another day as yesterday and the day before.

I was once so very brave.
A walk alone across a desert.
But now!?

I was brave.
I did find the War Memorial!
20 years it has been!
Wreath mended.
They too had lost their lives.
But forever.

Home. It is TV news again.
“Oh, hell not again” I shout.
Eat Just eat! I do.
Its 7.30 pm. Go to bed I do.
What else?

Bubble next week
There will be noise!
Happiness screaming round the house.

I sleep to thoughts of my bubble.
Then....
Covers oh hell another day.
Sofa and news!
Oh, help me!

Letter box goes!
Can I be bothered.
Covers off again.
Hall it is and curtain back.
NHS it says.
I grab it.
Yes! It is!

Ring someone!
I am ecstatic.
“Bertie” Blackbird on my windowsill – he likes the food.
“Take a message to the boys.”
Freedom it has....
As will we....
Inshalla

A life low on dopamine (Shortlisted) - J White

Isolation. Lockdown. Restrictions. Each strikes a chord with me.

Trapped in the house, you say? Struggling to socialise? Try being trapped in my body for a few hours.

Firstly, I might be smiling inside, but it doesn't spread to my face. The muscles won't cooperate. So, I look miserable, which puts people off. If I tell a joke, it's lost on people, because my face doesn't reflect the humour, even when they hear me.

Often, my words dribble out with little volume and run into each other. I know exactly what I'm saying, and it's important to me. But if you can't understand me, *that* is isolating.

Lockdown is when my body stops moving, and freezes. I set off to answer the door, and halfway there my feet glue themselves to the floor; I stand there feeling silly while the knocking goes on or the person goes away. Or I freeze getting out of bed, twisted between lying and sitting, muscles rigid. It gets exhausting, trying to find a way to kickstart myself again alone, like a car with a faulty gearbox. Inside, I'm revving up ready to go but the gears won't engage and I'm stuck in neutral.

Restrictions. Never mind about Boris and the gang. My own limbs tell me what I can and can't do. Sometimes they let me move for a while. Music with a steady beat, or an exciting moment when my team scores a goal, lift the restrictions for a while and I'm walking well, moving with almost the flow I used to have.

They say when you learn to ride a bike, you never forget. But with me, my brain struggles to remember how to do simple things like walking, fastening buttons, lifting a spoon to feed myself. Please tell me step by step what to do, because the process doesn't seem to kick in.

A young lass checked my memory. It's in there somewhere, but freezes like my muscles and struggles to emerge. Just like me.

Dopamine, the stuff that energises my circuits and gets my body working properly, is no longer being made in my brain in the quantities it used to be. So, tablets every few hours give it a boost. In that first surge when they take effect, I can get up easily and walk about with flow, smile and talk clearly -emerging from my personal lockdown. For a short time, I am no longer restricted or isolated.

Rachel, my lovely, bubbly bubble, comes daily now, breaking through the cycle of PPE-clad carers with her un-gloved hands - thoroughly washed - and unmasked smile. She's the only one who sees beyond this 'mask' that covers me and belies who I really am.

And now I know that the smile and touch of someone who knows you well, is the best thing in the world.

Parkinsons, they told me at the clinic. And after all these years, I'm still getting used to my new normal.

Me, My Cat and Lockdown - S Williams

As I look around my lounge
There are photos that were framed
There are photos of our family
And some of pets we named

This pandemic really worries me
There are those I won't forget
My shining light and saviour
Is called 'Tiger' - my beloved pet

During lockdown no one visits
Nobody even phones
My cat gives me his company
As I sit here all alone

He sits here right beside me
And touches with his paw
He just wants me to stroke him
And then again some more

If I had to write a song
I would call it 'Covid Blues'
My hair was long and straggly
And there's holes in both my shoes

I've trimmed my hair myself
And 'Yes' I've made a mess
I know it will grow back again
In eleven weeks or less

When the virus has long gone
We'll wave loneliness goodbye
Until then - try and sing some songs!
It will keep your spirits high

In the last few lonely weeks
My cat has saved my life
Whilst struggling with Long Covid
He woke me up at night

He knew I should have been awake
He woke me twice last week
He gave me two of his feline lives

Leaving seven for him to keep

I get my food delivered
I don't go to the store
I look forward each week when it arrives
And the knock upon my door

It makes me feel uncertain
When things will start to mend
In the meantime, 'Tiger' serves me
As my cat and only friend

His night and mine - S Br otzman

Room 9 sat outside
See his laboured chest jolty rise
Stare hard listening for life
Gaze dare not fall or stray
Watchful weighted eyes tire
Stand clumsy abruptly to stay awake

I know of his life accomplished
His pride his choices three now distanced daughters
His wife adored we comfort or try

Sharp involuntary jerk he wakes with a start
Wide eyes bewildered fear pulses
Tries to focus, a masked woman sits in his doorway staring intently

Sleep brings patchy peace deserved
Torment paused relaxed jaw
This time to think of his life and mine
What would he change, could he advise?
Sadness creeps his choices now ours
Comfort taken he's safe in my care

His world shrinking without consent or control
I've willed his eyes to stay closed. Let the journey go on
In 6 months or more I've learned of his being
He cannot know me, not learn my name see a friendly face
I wish he knew he was safe
We tell him he is
And now I tell him again

Tears can fall on the journey home
A frequent friend release to nights end
The new day revealing glistening silver set high, darkness dilutes
The promise of a crisp blue sky

February air pushed hard away
Window closed on the day I'll hide from today
Memories held sweat and sweet heat
Lamp glows bright thoughts drift again of being held too tight
Notes in bed scattered disorder
List on list plans goals. Of becoming a happier version
Thoughts rattle, race too skittish to catch
Darting fleeting kitten or cat

A moving slideshow of recent years passed
Feel. Stretch
Reach the space try not to think no warm embrace
Silence buzzes that isn't peace

Night Hiking Isolation - T Wilmshurst

Each summer when the night is short, I choose to hike alone,
Away from friends and family, and needy mobile phone.
From Sunset red to Sunrise, in Derbyshire's location,
While others sleep, I aim to keep, a walking isolation.

As evening falls, from home I step, along the High Peak Trail,
Its rocks and trees enfold me, as light begins to fail.
I've made my start at Black Rock, above gaunt Wirksworth town,
Then down to Cromford over fields, see sunset like a crown.

A pause at Cromford's Boathouse, midst drinkers having fun,
Then catch the late-night Transpeak bus, to little Taddington.
Here steeply up the hillside, alone upon Flagg moor,
I wonder what the next eight hours, for me may have in store.

The moon glows palely yellow as I stride along my way,
along the lane to Monyash, and then to Parsley Hay.
A late night driver's going home, brief headlights of far cars,
And planes intent on Manchester, entangle with the stars.

At Parsley Hay it's truly dark, and midnight's one hour gone,
My trail splits here from that which goes, to comely Tissington.
Alone through tunnel dark and drear, and into cutting deep,
Midst ghosts of trains, and railwaymen, the world is dead asleep!

Past Friden works, and Minninglow, my lonely path advances,
A fox flits by, then hedgehog, in secret night-time dances.
Past sleeping fields, and sleeping farms, and dreaming cows and sheep,
Through dark and ghostly, brooding woods, odd sounds make my heart leap.

Past Brassington and Carsington, and Longcliffe's gaping quarry,
To reach the end of all of this my legs will not be sorry.
But see, a new dawn glimmers, the dark begins to fade,
And darkened shapes take colour, and show of what they're made.

And now a lonely seat I take, above high Middleton,
Where aching legs can rest awhile, their journey almost done.
The sky beyond is richly red, the climax of the dawn,
A glowing sun's soon rising up; another day is born.

I stumble down the steep incline, where once the trains were lowered,
Then hobble on past Steeple Grange, I've never felt this tired.
And now I'm back at Black Rock, my lonely march is done,

My isolation here can end, a new day has begun!

The PM's Tale - D Wood

Through Eton and Oxford I dared to dream,
of leading this nation on behalf of the queen.
My chance duly came, they announced we had won,
the first job in hand was to see Brexit done.
This went to plan, things couldn't've been finer,
then came the news of trouble in China.
Pneumonia, or SARS, or a new kind of flu,
of what was to come, we hadn't a clue.
Very soon the virus escaped from Wuhan,
to a cruise ship moored off the coast of Japan.
On Covid came in frightening short order,
through Europe to France, then over our border.
In a moment of horror, I quickly did see,
that a terrified nation was looking to me.
With the heaviest heart I announced that each town,
would enter at least three months of lockdown.

I felt so upset and sick to my gut,
when I thought of jobs lost, and businesses shut.
Of the schools that would close, of families apart,
and worse was to come, this was only the start.
The bleakest part for, my colleagues and I,
was breaking the news that loved ones would die.
And so it began, this awful new age,
following advice, from Health England and SAGE.
Professor Chris Whitty, Mat Hancock, Van-Tam,
2 meters apart, wear masks, wash your hands.
The announcements I made, whilst you watched on TV,
made me feel so alone, cast adrift out at sea.
Mistakes quickly followed, at a terrible cost,
I feel the guilt of every life lost.
I questioned myself, was I up to the mark?
Of leading this country from out of the dark.

From bad to worse, I lay in despair,
my life in the balance in critical care.
But then came the fightback, rainbows and clapping,
Captain Tom in his garden, endlessly lapping.
Vaccines discovered, and then soon approved,
relief for the old, to tears some were moved.
Down through the ages, jabs in the arm,
saving us all from terrible harm.

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Home tutoring over, kids back in schools,
lockdown easing, an end to the rules.
I sigh with relief, along with the nation,
no longer burdened by weight of expectation.
Good times are coming, soon we'll be free,
of feeling like islands, alone in the sea.

Locked In Memories - B Hayter

An unwanted job,
(when jobs are scarce).
A task often tackled alone.
Emptying wardrobes,
Cupboards and drawers.
Filling bin bags and carriers
with lives.
Christmas jumpers and party frocks,
Polished shoes and ironed hankies never more to wipe away the tears.
And someone's had this job
Over one hundred and twenty five thousand times
So far this year.

Forbidden
Visits
Kisses
Goodbyes
Bits of lives which bring
Dignity
Humanity.

Alone.
Isolated.
Grieving.
Masked tears,
Distanced chairs at functional funerals
Remotely watched online.
Oh yes, they certainly have
Lost loved ones before their time.

Behind closed doors,
Duvets,
Cushions.
Separated
Apart
But still a part of someone.

In pieces.

Body
Legs
Arms
Ears

Head.
Cut from a shirt
Last worn at his granddaughter's wedding.
"Don't wash it" she said
"It still smells of him".
The last whiff of lingering life.

A solitary task,
Sewing.
One stitch at a time.
Passing the time alone
Surrounded by vestiges of those now gone.

Pinning together
Bits of lives.
Mum's flowery top,
Dad's tee shirt,
Daughter's sweatshirt, grandma's nightie.
Chosen with care.
Still plenty of wear, but no.

Occasional names indelibly inked
Inside waistbands and shirt collars.
Echoes of schooldays long gone
Now used for Care Home identification.
Pockets drop crumpled tissues, sweet papers, receipts
From last shared visits,
Cinema trips and bus rides -
Taken for granted then but now distanced
Happy day memories.

Fabric teddies.
Recycled relics.
Trying to help
Mend the broken hearts
With a simple Memory Bear.
Heart felt.

An embroidered heart made from felt
Reads
"Made from clothes I used to wear
Hold it close and I'll be there".
If only.
For the lonely
Prisoners of their own isolation,
Comforters.

A hug when hugs are not allowed
Not given
Not received
And so they grieve
Alone.
Isolated.

The last stitch is stitched.
A ribbon tied.
Another bear
Smiles.
Solace in a solitary world.
Childhood consolation.
A nearly would be charity shop
Reincarnation.
Salvation
Of locked in memories.

Isolation With Mother - S Wilbourne

Day 57 of Lockdown

Today, we are following a mother to see how she spends her time in isolation.

9am

Mother is pleased. She has just worked off two hundred calories on the exercise bike. Before lockdown, the only exercise she had done with the bike was lugging it around the house wondering where to put it. Mother has also been using her new fitness tracker. She was delighted to discover that by walking twenty steps to the biscuit tin, she lost one calorie.

11am

It is housework time. Last week, Mother tidied every drawer in the house, making it impossible to find anything. Today, she is tackling her teenage son's bedroom. It is at times like this that Mother is pleased she invested in full PPE gear. Mother is also keen to sort out the loft, but she can't at the moment because it's clogged up with toilet rolls and bags of pasta.

1pm

Mother is watching daytime television. She has started to think that she should cut down on her viewing... seven continuous episodes of 'Say Yes To The Dress' yesterday did seem rather excessive. On the positive side, Mother has now bought a nice reclining chair, adopted a snow leopard and taken out several funeral plans.

3pm

Mother is practising the piano. It has been a while since she's had time to play... nineteen years to be precise. Mother has dug out her book – 'Classical Music for Beginners'. Mother is enjoying herself, but the Queen of Sheba hasn't quite arrived yet. In fact, it sounds as if she is struggling to get up the front path.

5pm

Mother has realised that food has become a major focus of her existence. She now has time to plan out every meal. It's chilli tonight... and again a week on Thursday. Mother has just finished baking bread. She is pleased with her efforts. Who would have thought that she would invent a loafless crust?

7pm

Mother is excited. She is going to join a video call with her friends. Mother has been involved in a few of these already and is proud with how her IT skills have developed. She is now quite a dab hand at logging on and off, muting and unmuting and, most importantly of all, positioning her laptop so nobody can see her knickers on the radiator.

9pm

Mother is puzzle-solving. She has become hooked on sudoku and crosswords during isolation. Mother had no idea it could be so much fun placing numbers and letters in little boxes. Mother did consider boosting her brain power further by undertaking some online maths and English courses. In the end, she just decided to watch lots more episodes of 'Countdown'.

11pm

Mother is checking the calendar, but of course there is nothing much on it. Although Mother has tried hard to stay positive during isolation, she is looking forward to life beyond this confinement.

Mother hopes that she is another day closer to normality.

Never Alone - M Simpson

I sit alone and stare
And wonder whatever is fair,
Anymore... anywhere

Time has stood still since you passed from this world.
My heart reaches out from the depths of my soul,
To the heavens above where you wait,
I am told.
Dreams we never got to share,
And stories yet to unfold.

Memories seep from my veins,
Flashes of your face,
A loving embrace,
No more.

But as I sit quietly
Silently in prayer,
I feel your presence, oh so close !
My love, so dear.
And I know you are guiding and healing the hole left behind
Touching my dreams my thoughts, my mind.

Caressing my cheek as my tears continue to flow,
And angel whispers, no more tears you need to let go.
As each lonely day passes, trust I am still walking by your side,
In heaven I await with arms open wide.
For you, my love my dearest one.

Yes, we'll dance and sing and sway once again
Forever in my arms,
There to stay.

For each and every one that has lost someone dear,
Your thoughts, your prayers , so precious are shared,
And each helping hand,
Be it a friend, a neighbour , another lonely soul,
Together we will make it through, for yet another day to unfold.

Isolation Creeps: a warning (Shortlisted) - C Burton

Isolation. A few years ago the word didn't mean much to me either. It conjured a picture of a person alone, alone in an isolated place like a small jail cell or a dark dreary cave. They'd probably be malnourished, they'd probably be miserable, definitely unfriendly. They didn't look or act like me. I never thought isolation would intrude into my life. But that's the thing about isolation, you never know who it will strike, or how it will strike. It gradually creeps in, so slowly at first you don't even notice.

I'm sure isolation isn't in your thoughts; it lives far away in your mind. Perhaps you think it lives with those people who choose to inhabit remote areas in Scotland? Or perhaps you think it sits with those grumpy old men who chose to turn their back on everyone over something petty years earlier? But don't be fooled – isolation is here, it's not as far away as you think. It creates a social distance from people – little by little, so slowly at first that it's hard to identify.

It is possible to be in a crowded place, amongst the hustle and bustle and feel alone and disconnected from the world. Sometimes the world moves so fast, that even those who care the most about us, don't have time to listen. They are too busy to notice, too caught up in a virtual world, or perhaps simply focusing on the day to day tribulations rather than seeing what's really happening around them. Isolation sits backs and enjoys it all. It all makes their work so much easier.

Friends become acquaintances far too easily in this world. Missed calls, unanswered texts, meet-up plans that never transpire. Family falling outs and genuine connections replaced over time with just obligatory Christmas card exchanges.

Work colleagues are the worst – all those hours spent bonding, moaning, laughing and getting into mischief. They know so much about you and then – pow! Quick as flash! They are gone! Moved on to another job, promising to stay in touch, it never happens of course! Those left behind have no choice but to carry on, feeling more deflated with every replacement staff member until they can't bring themselves to go around that cycle again. Purposely cutting themselves off from those around them.

So here I am today.

Alone.

No true connections. I don't look isolated; I don't appear in distress. I'm surrounded by people, and yet I have no one to support me, no- one who understands me. No one to turn to in my hour of need. Isolation watches me, it feels my loneliness and it smiles.

Who am I? Why am I telling you this?

I was your friend once. You forgot about me too, but I remembered you, the good times we shared, and how I thought we'd be friends forever. You moved on, just like the others. It's never too late to pick up the phone and call me....

...please pick up the phone.

Having the last word - P Green

A tale of unfriendly encounters in isolation

Just to reflect on the fact that not everyone feels the wartime spirit of “we’re all in this together”.

People now have lost their manners,
Here comes one with protest banners:
“Lockdown’s pointless”, “Black Lives Matter”
Have no time to stop and chatter.

Tuesday, on my daily walk
I met a man; we didn’t talk.
I left the path to stand a while
So he could come first through the stile.

His dog came next; a pampered pet
With muddy paws and muzzle wet,
“He’s just friendly; wouldn’t hurt
A fly,” but paints my coat with dirt.

A woman on a horse’s back
Grabs right of way on any track,
Presumptuous! Could not care less
But leaves a monumental mess.

Silent voices echo loud -
No hint of “thank you” from the crowd.
For one lone walker they’ve no care,
It’s just as if you were not there.

If ever, on a horse I ride
And some kind walker stands aside
I will not need The Highway Code
To show who most respects the road.

When, further on, along the track
I meet that rider coming back
I’ll call, “You’re welcome”, quite bombastic
But no! She’s not! That’s just sarcastic.

The rain has made the ground a mess
Unsuitable for playing chess
With horses, dogs and human pieces -
Fresh manure and canine faeces.

It's rather like a country dance
Join in it, if you have the chance
Keep your distance, have no fear
Don't spread covid, don't come near.

To leave 2 metres space to pass,
I'll stand in stones and muck and grass.
A large black mask my face concealing
Little, but my eyes, revealing.

I'm not expecting gratitude
But ignorance is simply rude
As dog-man silent, passed, I spoke
To break the ice, I made a joke.

"People often stop to ask
Is this my face or just a mask?"
Without a smile, but with a frown
He turned and looked me up and down.

Perhaps he never got the joke.
He was a very stolid bloke.
"Should I just disappear?" he asked.
His teeth were clenched; his face not masked.

Belligerent, aggressive too,
He hissed, "I'll tell you what I'll do.
I'll get a [bleep bleep] badge to show
I've had my jabs, right? Off you go."

I know when I have been dismissed
But feel unable to resist
A smart riposte, I hope he heard
In Anglo Saxon, my last word.

Waiting for your touch (Shortlisted) - L Winson

I can't keep count of the days anymore.

Your voice crackles over the phone, its timbre tampered by technology.

I drink each syllable

til I'm sated from the lilt in your goodbyes. Playing back voice-mail messages

so your words fill the silence of a single-person flat.

Awake at three am: a neighbour's security light interrogates my eyelids.

We're both online. In the darkness I strain to transform pixels into text.

Nothing but glass and screen-glare to hold us together

as I lie in bed longing for flesh and pulse, for hair grown shaggy round the ears.

Each morning I take near-scalding showers, let the heat prickle my skin,

then fall into a sofa's embrace, cushioned by faux fabrics and micro-plastics.

I try to remember the sensation of strangers' coats against my hand

as passengers descended the train aisle.

Yesterday I attempted to hold myself. Caged inside my arms,

I couldn't feel any oxytocin bubbling. No buoyancy to keep me afloat.

My succulent children thirst for weeks. I drip feed them attention.

Egg yolk rays of sunlight: almost human warmth mediated by glass.

An outstretched palm reaches to cusp light like a bulb reaching for the soil's edge.

*Spring's golden caress
Cannot unearth flowers
From folds of blind stems.*

Rocky (Shortlisted) - S Hanes

It's been 345 days without you here and the you shaped hole in my heart is still gaping.
Every night I gently take the pillow case off of my pillow to smell where your head lay to rest that morning.

The smell is fading and I already miss it.

There's a stabbing sensation as the time ticks by to the night I won't know what you smell like.

My fingertips are brand new, I can't remember the feeling of your fur between them anymore.

It's funny isn't it?

That the things your senses pick up so naturally can be kidnapped from you.

My body is yet to break the cycle, every night muscle memory carries me downstairs to say good night to you.

The same words fall from my lips

"I love you Rocky, I'll see you in the morning"

But all I hear is quiet.

The room is empty.

And that morning never comes.

Sometimes, I wake myself up jolting in my sleep as if our souls are still connected and I am revisiting the last breath you took in my arms.

I still sometimes cry when I sit in the spot you fought for on the sofa every night.

Oh, how much regret I feel for the times I sat selfishly sprawled out for my own comfort.

I was deaf to the ticking on the clock speeding up.

But I guess I was never very good at telling the time.

I sleep so much.

Hoping to see you in my dreams.

I don't care about waking up and having to lose you all over again.

But the dreams turn to reality, the image of your almost hopeless expression is tattooed on the inside of my eyelids.

I can't escape even when I lie awake with open eyes.

The pit in my stomach swallows me up

I see myself trying to climb out of the sinking sand to reach you and bring you home. But I'm a second too late.

Time is something I could never save you from. It has never been on our side.

The only thing by my side was you.

~It's not that I miss you, It's that you're missing from me.

All but gone - D Poole-Bailey

So venture out, perhaps not today
For fields they beckon with baking hay
Alone I bow, jolt and bump as tractor purrs its steady grunt
A pat on the back from a kindred soul kept me alive in days of old.
Yet alone again and this my pay, for tending fields, flocks and hay.

So venture out, perhaps not just now
For pens need readying for calving cow
Alone with fork, string and knife as she surrenders this new born life
A welcoming smile and hearty brew for a friend in mind I once well knew
Alone again and this my lot, a single plate cup and pot

So venture out, perhaps not tonight
For sheep a-lambing, I tend their plight
Alone with lamp, bib and brace the cade lamb a lost embrace
A whiskey toast to a treasured friend who lived for the land to the very end.
Alone again and this my night, the moon the stars and candle light

So venture out perhaps next week
For tumbled wall I must complete
Alone with stones I lift and make the puzzle mine, no mistake
A single hug, a stolen kiss no miss-spent youth I dare to miss
Alone again in this my bed, lonely, loveless, my fear my dread

So venture out alas no more
But I stand with loop high in the straw
Alone with cobwebs and broken dreams in shed I built of timber beams
'Hello there' wafts a gentle voice and tenders me a second choice
Alone again that fateful night but from the darkness there be light

A Trip Down Memory Lane - K Waldram

It's 2020, I am alone. Have been a few years. It doesn't suit me.

But then, I think, what does? I'm not the easiest.

I am a writer; it's my main occupation. An ambition I've taken a long time to realise.

Sometimes I experience loneliness, anxiety, a sense of isolation. I think these things through, I problem solve. I have a good social life, family, close friends. They stick with me through the hard times, help level up the balance. The balance has shifted.

It's 2021, there is a pandemic.

It's a year this week since restrictions started. Covid was terrifying people, cases were escalating, in other places... People with the infection forcibly isolated, in other places...

Here, the lockdown came quickly. I am a conformist; and I am not. It depends.

I railed against the restrictions. Struggled. Doubted. Then conformed.

As the dust settled, I could see what was at stake, for myself, for others. I understood. It's a dilemma I've dealt with before, sadly.

I think of myself as grounded, rooted in my own sense of time and place. It matters to me.

There are things that feed my soul and things that starve it.

The restrictions stopped real-time travel. I missed rock, sea, tides.

They restricted social contact. I missed conversation, camaraderie, laughter.

I was afraid.

Without real intention or direction, I found myself heading down Memory Lane. As I set off, it seemed the place to go. As I continued, I realised what a lonely road it was. There was no one else on the Lane.

In real time, I am writing a dual homage to lost love. Two lost something each wanted to keep. Their path divided, diverged, disappeared. On the Lane, I find myself grieving their lost love, something I didn't do at the time. It seems to matter. It's long overdue. But there's no one to know, or care on the Lane. Another past appears...

It is 1984, there is a Pandemic...

It is more than half my lifetime ago. I am another version of me. I did not know then, what *I know* now. My friends were dying. But not of ignorance, of AIDS. I did not know what to do. I did know right from wrong. I was about to change path and then... I don't remember. Am I broken?

These memories are partial or faded. Rarely vivid. There will be no improved resolutions, this year or any other. I travel into things long gone, try to remember all that is lost. It is futile. Again, I grieve.

On the Lane no more details are added, no new directions found, no outcomes changed. The young woman I am will inevitably fail, again. But it's too late to turn back now. I am alone.

The Lane now, littered with memories of isolation, self-isolation, shielding. I wasn't prepared for the journey. I lingered too long in my grief. Will I go back? Who knows!

CONTROLLED

Isolation - R Greaves

‘Tik...tuk...tik...tuk...tik...tuk...’

The slow tick of the grandfather clock echoed round the room as Rhona sat at the table reading the letter.

‘You must stay in your house and not have any visitors’. The message couldn’t have been clearer.

‘But’ she pondered ‘What could she do? She couldn’t go round to her elderly mother for a cuppa; she couldn’t work her shift at the charity shop; she couldn’t let her son pop in for a de-stress after work’.

‘Grr!’ she clenched her teeth in frustration.

‘But then...’ she thought ‘there’s no point in worrying about things I can’t do!’. And as Rhona resigned herself to the situation, she felt the cloak of commitments drop from her shoulders.

She walked across to the window. A robin was pecking at the fat ball in her garden. It spotted her movement and flew off.

‘Pht! Alone again!’ her sigh broke the silence.

‘Lub,dub...lub,dub...lub,dub...’

Rhona felt her heartbeat echoing round her empty chest. It was many years since she’d been so utterly alone; no obligations, no promises.

Turning back from the garden, her eyes strayed towards the bookcase. On the top shelf were her old CD’s; long-abandoned and dusty. She browsed the titles, remembering when she’d enjoyed the music. She pulled down a CD and dusted it off; ’20 disco floorfillers .

‘Click!’ The disc was inserted into the player.

‘Whirr!’ The player readied itself.

Then, as the first few bars of ABBA’s Dancing Queen filled the room, she closed her eyes and felt the music. The opening glissando descending the keyboard created a ripple of excitement, as if someone was running their finger down her spine. Her shoulders began to move with the rhythm and she started to step to the beat.

‘You can dance, you can jive. Having the time of your life’ crooned Frida and Agnetha.

Rhona tossed her head, shaking her hair loose, and pushed back the table, making space for her dance floor.

She was back in the 70's, strutting her stuff at the disco.

'You are the dancing queen, young and sweet, only seventeen' she felt youthful; free-spirited and care-free, no commitments and no worries. This was the life!

But as the song was fading to its end her shoulders dropped. Rhona stood in silence, uncertain, until the familiar opening chords of Queen flowed out into the room.

'Tonight I'm gonna have myself a real good time'

'Yeah Freddie!' she shouted as she peeled off her cardigan and threw it aside. She kicked her shoes under the table, and began to swirl to the music.

And as the tempo changed, Freddie's staccato voice exploded into the room **'Don't stop me now'**. She punched the air. **'Don't stop me 'cos I'm having a good time'**

Rhona whirled aeroplane-like, all worries gone, free and alone, enjoying the moment.

And outside a little robin, hiding in the bushes, cocked its head and stared at the crazy animal thrashing about in the privacy of its glass-fronted cage.

DOES ANYONE DO ISOLATION LIKE ME - J Dysfunctional

Four walls and a screen/ day in and day out/ repetition is numbing/ forgetting to eat or the meaning of sleep.

They say freedom's coming/ we're in this together/ the whole of the nation, is in isolation.

Four walls and a screen/ I listen within/ to the beat of my heart/ my head in a spin/ heart's fit to burst/ to break free of its cage/ but all travel is banned in this new and dark age/ Plans I can't make/ no destinations/ what consolations in grim isolation?

At least,

No bombs are falling/ I'm able to eat/ loss of appetite and loss of sleep are preferable to dying from a killer disease/ in a hospital bed unable to breathe/. They say there's a risk in isolation, to mental well-being and physical health/ the local surgery's out of bounds/ time to analyse myself.

Do I drink too much in isolation/ have I put on deadly weight/ under this duress will I start to stress? / feel I'm in a prison/ why am I driven to crazy thoughts in isolation?

Is anybody out there? /The days of the week/ all blur into one/ how seldom I speak/ Some mirror practise is now what I need/ why does Robinson Crusoe stare back at me.

Am I on an island or Never Never Land? Grand plans for travel, but all travel is banned. I embrace the surreal/ I don't live now in time/ the only escapes are the ones in my mind.

Does anyone do isolation like me? Am I doing it right with four walls and a screen? /do you feel like you're shrinking, clinging, sinking/ are you touched by a madness, suffering loss and sadness/ Tips on the screen/ turn my room into a gym? /Go on, have fun in isolation

I'm told have patience/ soon I'll be free/ but what kind of world then will be waiting for me? Banks and shops closed permanently/ gone familiar pubs and small cosy cafes

It's cards plastic only, it's out of fashion, money/ queues for health treatment/ life one huge backlog/ and a bigger divide between the haves' and have nots

To the banks we'll have to payback trillions, zillions/ for these new good old days will we yearn? / those days we spent in splendid isolation?

Will reality bite like a switch blade knife, were we safer cocooned in our rooms?

They say the virus is in retreat/ then they say it's here forever/ who do we believe? /the window to the world truth or deceit is my TV screen.

Four walls and a screen my room and my mind are shrinking/ what in future can the world ever be? Too many questions not near enough answers/remember, remember not to worry.

On a great day coming once we're all set free/ imagine the feelings of relief and ecstasy /reunions of friends and families/until then my inner scream waits on bated breath to be released

From isolation.

Does anyone do isolation like me?

“BEWARE OF ISOLATION” - L Hind

Little did Maggie realise how dramatically her life was about to change.

The challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic were bad enough for everyone, but this latest edict from the government was probably a bridge too far

“Everyone aged over seventy should stay at home with immediate effect. There are no exceptions to this instruction”

“Had the British government really imposed total isolation on a large percentage of the population in the twenty first century?” Maggie cried to herself. Like most people she had come to terms, albeit reluctantly, with previous instructions to only go out if necessary.

But this latest development was starting to affect her mental as well as her physical health. She increasingly lacked the energy and motivation to do anything including housework, gardening, phoning friends, listening to the radio and even watching some of her favourite TV programmes. The voices of more and more presenters got on her nerves, very minor things started to irritate such as catching her cardigan on a door handle, and she was becoming more anxious and impatient.

Widowed in her fifties with no children and very few relatives, she’d coped remarkably well with grief and bouts of loneliness. During the Covid lockdown she’d even struck up friendships with neighbours who would normally be out at work. She did have some close and very supportive friends, but Maggie and her husband had to move several times with his job, so some of these friends lived some distance away. Her landline, I-phone and I-pad were now her lifeline.

But the prospect of not being able to leave her house - apart from walking round the garden, and she wasn’t sure this was allowed - was a truly daunting prospect. Zoom meetings had become impersonal and too competitive, and she’d lost the motivation to do a different drawing every day.

And then, when she was probably at her lowest ebb, she had a telephone call from the Samaritans. They were trying to make contact with everyone directly affected by this shock announcement, and that was probably the wake-up call Maggie needed.

“Think positive” was always her husband’s motto in life. She owed it to him to do just that. Spurred on by numerous studies of “Mindfulness”, she tried to be more ‘in the moment’, and recall things on a daily basis that she’d either been lucky enough to be able to do in the past, or was happy about at the end of each day.

And then, the news that everyone had been desperate for - “all restrictions to be eased and finally lifted over the next six months, starting tomorrow”.

Maggie went to bed feeling calmer and happier than she had since the beginning of the first lockdown. After breakfast the following morning she rushed out of the house, desperate for her first walk in three months, and ran straight into the path of a huge delivery truck.

The driver never drove again.

Isolated in Eyam - A Millican

You never knew you could find solace in this shed. Why would you?
This was never your domain. But life has changed beyond imagination and
it may never be the same. Mind you it didn't take long to make it your granny shed.

You wiped years of white cobwebs from window corners; overcame revulsion
at a dead wasp, desiccated bluebottles, their skeletal killer a miniature Aragog.
You swept dark corners where dying mice once crept, their tiny bones
like panel pins dropped long ago by your husband before you entered
the isolation of widowhood. Yet this is different somehow.
Now, a nation locked in fear, yet here you are
quietly enjoying this era of confinement.

You keep the door ajar as long as it's not too breezy; enough to let sunlight
warm you seat. You've got blankets, a bobble hat, mittens and an old Lloyd Loom chair
you brightened up to Manganese blue from its original dowdy cream.
The world seems far away.

Outside, nature is coming alive.
Where the harsh *chink chink* of a great tit vies through the blossoming leaves
with chaffinch song which makes you pause as another lengthening Spring day
draws to a close.

And if there is some summer heat you can sit beyond the door, still catch
your beloved Classic FM or the comforting voices of Radio 4.
You brought your pencils and sketch pad from the house, ordered new watercolours
from Winsor and Newton, expensive paper from Aquerelle.
You leave your mobile and i-Pad indoors; want to nurture this sense of isolation;
wish you could choose your own desert island discs
and bask in a warm English summer.

Isolation - C Bagnall

It is so peaceful. I sit here alone and gaze with very little intent at the perfect way in which the snow has transformed my tiny world into a wonderland of silent white. A feeling of aloneness but quiet acceptance overtakes me. It doesn't hurt to just be here with the familiar view from my kitchen window. I have settled over the long days of lockdown into a self that really doesn't need anything more than a grocery delivery once a week and the ability to shop online.

Nobody comes so the tins of home bake goodies are not needed and I don't need to assure people that "my kettle is always on"

The sky is still laden with more snow to come and I lazily wonder how much there is in other places. I am warm and comfortable and the thought of being on a mountain in a blizzard is inconceivable. But just think, people do it all the time. We can buy all the right gear, we can learn the skills needed to survive and we can conquer any peak. Our heroes across the years have proved that we are invincible against the vastness of our planet. We are greater than the mountains and the deserts and the jungles and the forests.

I gaze up to the mesmerising sight of snowflakes swirling on their journey to carpet my view. It is almost hypnotic and my eyes and brain are reluctant to leave.

Beyond our sky of snow is a universe greater than we can know. We strive to understand what is out there and desire to have mastery over all that we know through ever developing technology and space programs. We can conquer space.

My gaze drifts down to the garden again where all definition is muffled under cushions of snow. I imagine the world snuggling into the blanket of fluffy white. Maybe, if the weather improves a little, I will take my one-a-day excursion into the village. Maybe! Beneath my boots is a volatile earth that we monitor with clever instruments devised by man and content ourselves that we can measure the grumblings of the planet and will be given warnings to prepare for volcanic eruptions. We have been to the depths of the oceans and we know all about the strange world of marine creatures and the plant life and contours of the environment that is theirs. We understand.

I think that later today I will try again to work on my sewing project. It seems of little purpose to be so creative. Who is it for? Just me I suppose but it will fill some time.

I smooth the material onto the table and , for a moment, admire the quality and design. I pin the pieces into place and a thought drifts through my mind.

On the head of that pin could be fifteen thousand viruses!

Humankind cannot possibly contain that thought. And here I sit, in isolation, with the pin in my hand.

Isolation - T McDonnell

Feeling lonely is only one symptom,
being alone sometimes another,
but these two tend to smother
all other aspects of something
far deeper, far darker,
the black crystal
lodged in the ore of the mind
that lies in silence
at the very core
of what it is
to feel,
regardless of time or place,
utterly apart with this
iron-hard stone,
heavy as lead,
black as jet,
cold as ice,
silent and brooding wedged
so deep in your being,
it seems a part of you,
the beating heart of you,
filling a void that really shouldn't exist
that doesn't exist in those others
that either insist on trying to fix
their problem with you,
or simply look away.
That's isolation,
or so I find;
a kind of state of mind where
words lose their meaning
and cannot begin
to reveal what life
and circumstance
and people
have forced inside
to hide in the dark,
to lie like a hulk alone, becalmed,
anchored and awkward
amid the sails,
stark and lame, without a name,
ignored not concealed, there
in plain view a sight
that no-one wants to see

hanging before them, exposed to all,
revealed as in a mirror,
culpability made visible
upon the invisible surface
of another's isolation.

The sky is dark - D McDonnell

I was a ghost under the lamppost
of yesterday's memories, my shadow
social distanced in the next street
while my feet keep pace
leaving no trace on the snowy pure invisible
lost in the city of a forgotten dream.
I walk slowly what seems like
forever drinking the cup of sorrow
I borrow from a homeless tramp
damp in his newspaper blanket
and wonder why the sky is dark
in the winter park
where fingers of ice
stiff in their transparent glove drip
on the pigeons black foot prints.
I walk slowly what seems like forever
under the lamppost of yesterday's memory
and wonder why the sky is dark
while my feet keep pace
leaving no trace on the snowy pure
invisible lost in the city of a forgotten dream

St Beatrice (Shortlisted) - G Durrant

'Hello? Is that Kate Leicester?' asked a man with an accent. 'This is the U.S. Coast Guard, ma'am, we have your sister on the line.'

My sister's confident voice crackled across the thousands of miles. 'Kate? It's me, Louise.'

I pressed down on the top of my chest with my free hand. 'Louise? Is that really you? Where are you?'

'Listen, Kate, we don't have long. I couldn't get a signal for ages, but somehow the coastguard picked up on my radio and patched me through. I'm in the middle of the Pacific, a couple of hundred miles west of Hawaii. Are you ok? Have you been getting out?'

I could sense her hunched over the radio in the stale smelling cabin of St Beatrice, her small yacht. I struggled to think of the right things to say, and I knew that later there would be the self-recriminations. Too quietly I said, 'I'm ok, I guess. I'm on my own in the flat. Not been out for a few weeks. When will you be coming back?'

'Not until September, Little K. I know it's hard, but you must get out, even if it's just to go and see the sea.'

There was only thirty minutes between us, but I would always be Little K, and just to hear it spoken was like having a hug. I loved my sister, in part because she was the only one who never judged me. For everyone else, I was the gifted one who had wasted herself, but then they didn't know about the panic that paralysed me when I was caught in a crowd, or when the doors hissed shut on a busy train. The panic that had imprisoned me for too much of my life.

I stood there, emotional and tongue-tied.

'Cat got your tongue Kate?' she laughed, 'I'm so looking forward to seeing you again. It's lonely out here! I've got so much ...'

And that was it. The line was dead. I kept saying her name into the phone, but she was gone.

I fought back tears as I turned to the map on the wall of my small flat and traced my sister's route across the vast Pacific. I felt nauseous as my imagination searched her out, and then, as when we were girls, my mind slammed into me and I was her, alone at the helm of St Beatrice. I had to grab hold of the boat's wheel to steady myself as my legs gave way while my mind tried to adjust to the emptiness. The water was choppy in a brisk breeze that whipped spray into my face, and wherever I looked the sea went up to the horizon under the vastness of a clear sky above. Beyond what I could

see, I knew that there was no one there, just water for hundreds of miles in all directions. I sank to the deck of the boat, crushed by an overpowering sense of solitude.

Isolation (Shortlisted) - C Brook

“So when are you starting, Sarah?” she said, with an air of pride.

People looked round as her clear voice rang out and I shrank in my seat. She has always had the sort of voice that carries. That follows you round corners.

“Have you got your uniform ready for Jays?” she continued,

“No mum” I say in a low voice. “Mum, I’m not going to Jays”. Jays is the local secondary school.

Her watery eyes hold mine for a moment. Everything pauses. Then a nurse breezes in with a cup of tea in a plastic beaker.

Abruptly, her eyes are absorbed in a passing bird outside. Never looking back; never seeing the tear escape from my eye.

You see, I’m not eleven anymore, I’m over fifty.

We sit most days, like two small islands adrift from the mainland. Isolated from each other. Separated from the world. Reflections of the past shapeshift around us, as they break with the waves upon our sandy shores.

I long to be back on the same beach together, her warm hand guiding mine, like it always did.

I carefully open my parcel and lay out the miniature quilt. I have her attention. She examines the dollhouse patchwork we’d once sewn together, turning it over in her hand; hers the neat stitches, mine the oversized ones.

Then discards it carelessly.

“Draw me” I prompt instead, sitting back agreeably.

For a moment she hesitates, then slowly picks up a pencil. I sit motionless as her eyes run over my face.

“You have a scar here” she frowns, indicating her own brow.

“I fell off a radiator when I was four and needed stitches.” I wait. Don’t you remember, mum? You took me to the hospital. We played snap while we waited. It was all you had in your handbag. A pink box with a dog on the front.

She stares hard at me, then scribbles. Her sketch has a strong passing likeness. She has definitely caught something of me.

“Mum – that’s great!” Immediately she backs off.

“I’m not your mother! I have a little girl.”

There is an uncomfortable silence. I bite my lip.

I am an expert at navigating the dangerous rip tides of the present, which threaten to snatch me away into darkness. Away from her.

But sometimes I want to close my eyes and just let them wash me away.

Then softly, very softly I begin. Summer 1977. The song we sang all summer 1977.

“Jubilee, Oh Jubilee! The Gracious Queen we love to see!”

As I launch into the second verse, a shaky voice joins me. Thin but strong. I realise that my mum is also tapping out the rhythm on the table.

Our islands are finally linked at low tide. We are paddling through the sparkling waves.

“Sarah” she smiles as her loving hand reaches out to me. Then, looking far out to sea we laugh together and sing it all over again.

And the waves are perfectly warm.

ONE (Shortlisted) - B Artuso

She is the one
Who came from elsewhere
She didn't fit in
Considered too rare

She is the one
With a weeping heart
Acted too quick
Slow to be smart

She is the one
Who wore a malaise
Got lost with herself
Wasted her days

She is the one
Always on trial
Inside - drowning
Outside - a smile

She is the one
Who bleeds into blue
That sang about love
Dishonest and true

She is the one
Who wanted to stay
When the choice to be made
Was taken away

She is the one
Who cannot pretend
Often alone
Missing a friend

I am the one
That she used to be
Who she is now
Tomorrow
Let's see

The Walk - F Sykes

Need to breathe, need a break
From the world. The news. The screen. The people I love.
Gulps of air slow time, my feet pad, my head clears.

On my own but not alone. They all pass:
Grandparents, lovers, happy dogs and children
Strangers smile like old friends,
Coffee dangling from sanitised fingertips

The deer, suddenly celebrities, were here all along
With the coots, the flowers, the trees, the pond.
Spring sounds a festival,
I listen as I close my eyes to the sun

Now I breathe.

Lodge Moor Isolation - S Briddon

The room was impersonal, walls painted in a neutral shade, everything minimalist. At one end of the room the only door and on the same wall a large window containing a smaller window which opened to allow food and drink to be passed. From my bed I could see the outside world, but the scene was grey - not surprising for the last days of November. The room felt cold and austere. For seven days I had scarcely noticed my surroundings but now I was over the worst of my illness and started to take an interest in the world around me.

Now and then I could hear a murmur of voices but save an occasional visit from a nurse or orderly I was left to my own devices. On the bedside table, apart from the obligatory jug of water and glass there was a vase of flowers and a magazine which lay unopened, unread. I was not up to reading yet: my head still felt tender but at least I could lift it off the pillow without feeling as if it would explode.

I had been admitted with a serious case of meningitis. The previous days were all a blur as I had been in and out of consciousness. I was aware that all who had entered the room had to wear a gown, gloves and mask. Visiting was limited - two until three in the afternoon and seven until eight pm with no more than two people at one time. Up to now the only visitors had been my husband, my parents and two volunteer hospital visitors. I now longed for company, the feeling of isolation swept over me not a feeling I was accustomed to. Having two young children and family that lived close I was used to having people around most of the time. Patients were not encouraged to go wandering round the building and for the next two days I was accompanied by a member of staff when going to the bathroom. The intravenous in my arm made movement difficult and I was still weak from having taken no nourishment for over a week so there was still the possibility that I might collapse. It was still early days of recovery as far as the nursing staff on the isolation wing at Lodge Moor Hospital were concerned.

For the next few days the room became more a prison, as I improved I needed less and less need for medical attention but was discouraged from leaving the room as fear from contracting or passing on infection had to be considered. This was 1989, tv, phone and internet were alien to a hospital and entertainment very limited. Being alone for protracted time gave me the opportunity to reflect on my life so far and plan for a better future.

Shadows - S Williams

He was there again. Only this time his grey skin was obscured by a mask that tenderly hooked around his pointed skull. Mouth gaping amidst hot breath; his tongue constantly running rhythmically against his teeth. Sucking sound.

Once a family had lived next door and the garden had been littered with yesterday's most treasured toys. Then it all changed. Now he was there. Shaggy grass verges became meticulously tended carpets of green, almost like a golf course. Misaligned sunflowers turned to orderly conifers. The worst, perhaps the worst change: his constant watch. The cracks in curtains and sly glimpses that had transformed during the lockdown to unrelenting stares. He'd erected cameras in the fog of one grey morning, pointing them towards her door.

In the beginning she'd distracted herself; petals on the doorstep; hampers of vegetables; the odd bag of flour- gold dust in the year of Isolation. She had painted rainbows on bottle caps and listened as they tinkled in the wind like some call to prayer; painting pasta and angling the camera during meetings whilst the baby suckled at her breast. She had been on walk after walk after walk and watched sadly the sourdough fermenting on the windowsill, filling the house with its pungent scent.

His stare flickered like an old movie between each of her daughter's thrusts on the swing. She had distracted herself, but his presence nestled on her conscience like some poisonous glow worm. It is well-know to many that vultures may remain aloft for hours.

Scrambling over stale biscuit crumbs like explorers desperate to reach the summit, they sat in their car seats. The click of belts was neatly comforting, like books ordered alphabetically in the library. They began to roll steadily down the driveway with the sound of gravel crunching pointedly beneath them. He was there. She would not look up.

A clunk, a hiss. A gentle warning beep that sent panic scorching across her temple.

Against the heavy-duty black tyre, the nail glittered proudly; protruding but half masked to hide its dirty secret. She knew he was there. It is well known that old vultures favour viewing platforms. She would not look up.

She scooped them up like meadow flowers. Freshly washed curls skipped alongside her anxious tread. Mummy, why's your face all wet? Maybe it was that naughty onion again, Mummy. The little one twirled away; the case was solved. They were parchment, she, the string taut and fraying from each small, blistering ordeal... the tiny chippings that fired irresolute clay. She felt merely an inhabitant of a body navigating helplessly each day. All because of him.

True, she had learnt a new way of being, of ignoring the omniscient presence next door. Yet in the gloom of night, the spaces in between their sleeping and wakefulness, was when she missed her old life the most. She longed to feel safe in her own home. She no longer noticed autumn leaves that had begun to fall.

The Indifference of the Night - S Cardew

“Loss”.

‘Oh God! What time did I put the light out? Quarter to ten. So that’s what? An hour and ten minutes..’

‘Oh, my neck.. Turn. Push the pillows up. Breathe slowly.. deeply... Let your jaw go soft... Shoulders down... Where’s my body? Something to focus on - steady me down. Flex your neck. Hear the grind and crack, releasing the tension. Aaah. Where are your feet? This one - the left one - is up and my knee is bent. The other one - the right one - is down, just over the edge of the mattress, neither hot nor cold. Just right. That’s nice. Let the muscles fall and be absorbed. Yes, nice..’

‘Bastard!’

‘She spat the word through that thin blue mask. The force of it.. Droplets must have penetrated. Such a flimsy protection from such malice. Just that one word, no others. One was enough, though, to skewer me in front of the thin scattering of mourners. Mrs Whitehouse looked shocked. The nurses from the home didn’t, though. They’d heard worse. I didn’t know what to say. Stepped back, I did, to buy more time but that didn’t work. I just looked.. Mouth empty. We both knew.’

‘And breathe.. Where are your arms? Raised, the right one’s out, above the duvet. The left one’s..’

‘Bastard!’

‘I can hear it. The once-Welsh vowels corrupted by a lifetime in London but still powerful enough to chop into my balance, interrupting my own silent contemplation of grief. She’s always had a tongue on her, has Siân, but she’d never used it to whip me before.’

‘Oh God!’ ‘What?! WHAT?!’ ‘The pillow doesn’t know. So much for memory foam.’

‘Can I speak to someone? Ben. My phone. On the nightstand. It’s there. Wrong way up.. So.. Recents. ..Ben. Can I ring him now? No.’

‘NO!’

‘Well, a message, then.. But what’s the use of that?!’

‘Stupid! STUPID!’

‘Ssh, ssh now. Come on.. Calm.. What would Jenny say? She’d ask me if I was the victim and, of course, she’d want me to see that I wasn’t. But I was. I was! The victim of my sister’s

unprovoked attack on me, on the occasion of our mother's funeral. Can you be more victimised than that?! No point looking for the good side..'

'Bastard!'

'She stabbed me, too, with her black-gloved finger. Just below my collar-bone. I can feel it now, sore still, close to my heart.

'Turn over and breathe.. Happy thoughts. What happy thoughts can I have? Take your time. Think..'

'The gravestones looked wondrous, capped by snow and glinting. The sounds were all softened. My suit, my one suit, still fits.. well, mostly. The sun shone and there was warmth in the rays, like a Caribbean dawn. Aah now, that had been a holiday..

'Bastard!'

'Who said that?!'

'Oh God, ..still night.. What time is it?'



'Christ! Help!'

'You could have phoned.'

'..I could have phoned..'

The Survivor - P Gough

Jane put down the shopping, rang the bell and stepped back. After a lot of shuffling noises, the door opened a crack and Esther's ancient face peered out, the wrinkles moving upwards into a smile as their owner recognised her caller.

'Ah, Jane, you are so good to me.'

'It's my pleasure. I just wish I could come in and have a cup of tea, like the old days.'

'That day will come, if we are patient.'

Jane wasn't so sure. It was illegal to mix with the unvaccinated, who had to stay at home except for one hour a day when they were allowed out wearing the official 'Unvaccinated' tabard. To start with, Esther had ventured out to do her own shopping but the name-calling and abuse had been too much for her.

Jane had tried to persuade Esther to have the vaccine, in the same way that she had tried to persuade her to have the flu jab for many years, but Esther was adamant. When Esther showed her the number tattooed on her arm, she understood why.

'How is your brother?' asked Jane.

'He is not so good. I fear his time will be soon. I speak to him most days, but it would be so good to visit.'

Once again, Jane marvelled at the strength and resilience of these two siblings, orphaned survivors of the concentration camps.

The next time Jane visited, Esther's usually cheerful face looked troubled.

'Is something wrong, Esther?'

'It is Levi. The home telephoned me this morning. He is sinking fast. They think it will only be a matter of days.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry.'

'If only I could see my little brother one last time.'

'You'll only be able to do that if you get vaccinated.'

'I know. I think perhaps the time has come for me to be brave. Will you...?'

'Yes, of course, I'll arrange it for you.'

Two days later, Jane collected Esther in her car and took her to the vaccination centre, which was so much quieter than when she herself had received the jab. She sat and held Esther's hand as the nurse inserted the needle.

'There, all done,' she said.

'That is it? It is over?' said Esther. 'But it did not hurt, not like...' and she looked down at her arm.

'I told you it wouldn't hurt,' said Jane. 'Now in a couple of days' time you'll be able to visit Levi.'

Esther looked at her with tears in her eyes.
Soon after Jane got home, her 'phone rang. It was Esther.

'Esther, are you OK?'

'Oh, my poor brother! There was a message waiting for me. It is too late.'

'Oh Esther, I'm so sorry. Would you like me to come round?'

When Jane arrived at Esther's, she found the old lady looking surprisingly cheerful.
'Jane, my dear, I am going to be a modern Jewess. I am going to say kaddish at the funeral.'

The Challenge (Shortlisted) - P Walker

He had read it somewhere, and now couldn't find it.

He didn't mind at first, only three weeks needed to flatten the curve.

He thought back to when he was a small child, just after the end of the War. Easy. His Mam had saved and prepared their pantry full of preserves and tins for such days when time or money was short.

Corned Beef, Spam, peas, carrots; pineapple and mixed fruit for teatime treats with Evaporated milk. He had followed her mantra to put stuff away for a rainy day. He liked going in the pantry. Mam would ask him to fetch some potatoes or a jar of jam for a tart. Neatly stacked provisions represented a future, safety from that wolf always lurking at the door.

Now he had instant mashed potato, beans, instant soup, dried milk; a freezer stuffed with ready meals and chips.

He was going to be fine, he had plenty to keep him going, just milk and bread to get. Not forgetting tea bags though, he wouldn't want to run out.

Then there was this toilet roll fiasco. He had never seen anything like it. People with trolleys full of toilet rolls; kitchen rolls, bum wipes! His Mam wouldn't have worried about fancy paper. They had newspaper cut up and put on a hook in the outside Privy. If that ran out she would have even picked some Dock leaves from the allotment. He chuckled at that memory.

He managed. His son left milk on the step, his neighbour offered to fetch shopping but he didn't like to trouble anyone. He was all right.

Then he had a text on his phone. He spent a lot of time on this phone, the computer or looking at the telly.

The text told him that as he was over 70 and vulnerable he had to shield for 12 weeks. Isolate. They said it was really important, if he went out he could catch Covid and would be a nuisance to the NHS.

It was very different this time though. The rules were strict and he didn't want to get into trouble. He thought of all the things he would do, painting, gardening, reading, doing a jigsaw. Things to keep his mind active.

Except that he didn't. The days fell into each other and he would sit for longer. Doing nothing. This feeling of isolation increased throughout the year.

He reminisced about the old days. Good times.

He missed his Maisie, she had passed five years ago now and Sam his Labrador companion, his constant shadow, friend. He hadn't seen his family or talked to anyone except the consultant on the phone checking on the progress of his Blood cancer.

Some days later he found it. The original article on his phone. It was for a short story competition about isolation in 500 words.

He read it again and decided he wouldn't bother.

He'd got nothing much to say anyway.

A COVER (Shortlisted) - E Fearn

Bradley had offered to clean the library many times.

He had suggested to Miranda when she was in a rare placid mood, that they should look at restoring the old floor. Bradley had spotted under the wooden bookshelves evidence of white and blue marble. Miranda had immediately lost her venture into kindness and snapped at him. She pointed around the room, her voice rising that the refurbishment had cost the earth and kept the heat in better. That this place was pointless and a cluttered mess in her already cluttered and messy life. That he was the only person who used it and how was a tramp ever going to help her financially?

She had apologised later by telling a joke she had read on a cafe blackboard. He could never be too resentful toward Miranda. The world had forced her to be angry and resentful, same as him. He just had more practise at disguising it.

There was a deep window seat which looked over the square. He could, although he would avoid looking whilst reading, see the spot under the tree where he usually slept at night if the police didn't move him. Where he was supposed to move to they never told him. The officer wouldn't even bore him with the 'talk' anymore. 'Move on!' She would bellow. 'Moooooove on!' Bradley called her 'Officer Move On' in his head and would pretend the officer was simply announcing herself.

He was deep into Charles' first meeting with Sebastian in Brideshead Revisited when he saw a young girl in a bright red jumper, stroking Finty whilst she wagged her tail slowly.

'Finty! Fin! Stop bothering the lass!'

She looked about five but he had never been good at guessing ages.

'She's funny!'

'Aye, that's one word for the dafty.'

She looked around the room. 'Books.' She stated.

'Yes. Do you like to read?'

'No.'

'That's a shame.'

She considered this and then said, 'I can't like books because I like dancing.'

'You could like both.'

'Silly.'

'You could. You could do two pirouettes and then read two chapters. The dancing reader.'

She sat down crossed legged and played with the dogs ears. 'You live outside. I've seen you.'

Bradley played with the frays of his scarf. 'I guess that's true.'

'Sometimes I live outside in my tent but only for one or two nights. But

only when the sun has been shining.’

‘I don’t mind the cold.’ The lie he told most often.

‘What’s her name?’

He was thankful at how quickly and willingly she moved away from subjects.

‘Finty.’

‘Funny.’

‘I suppose it is. But any name sounds funny if you think about it long enough.’

She wrinkled her nose.

‘Rosie. Rosie. Rooooosiiiiieeeee.’

‘See?’

‘That’s my name.’

‘I’d never have guessed.’

‘Say yours.’

‘Mine?’

‘So it sounds funny.’

‘Bradley. Braderbradleeeeeey.’

She giggled.

‘Bye bye, Braderbraderleeeeeey.’

She hopped up and left without looking at him, leaving Bradley suddenly and without warning, lonely.

The Fox and The Midnight Forest - N Wallace

There once was a fox with a heart full of longing who lived in the midnight forest.

Fox had welcomed her isolation when she first chose it. A life in peaceful seclusion was all she had wanted. But she could not have understood the full extent she had been tricked.

The hushed falling snow brought stories of the elusive Moon who took pity on wayward souls. Moon's presence was a half-forgotten dream in the midnight forest, where the trees' canopy spread so thick and broad light never warmed the earth. Fox resolved to petition Moon for her one wish.

To free her from her imprisonment in the midnight forest.

When the midnight forest learnt of Fox's plan to leave her den, the wind howled and whipped the snow in a frenzy. It settled in the form of a wolf, snarling and gnashing its teeth.

Fox scrambled through the trees, the ice wolf snapping at her heels spurred on by the wind. Thorns sprouted long and thin like needles, raking red welts through Fox's russet coat. Blood thrummed in her ears. All Fox could do was run.

She ran until stabs of pain shot through her legs. Fox risked a glance behind her. The wolf, seeing her weaken, slowed to a saunter, pointed teeth grinning. Fox had nowhere to go. The rushing brook blocked her escape and she knew it was madness to ask it for help.

Fox closed her eyes and jumped. The cold water shocked her and she broke the surface flailing. The wolf jumped after her, realising Fox's cunning when it was too late. The brook slammed into the wolf, loosening chunks of ice until it melted away. Limbs exhausted, Fox found a foothold and heaved herself onto the bank. Mud and snow sank into her wounds and she blinked.

She had reached the edge of the forest.

Bloodied and freezing, Fox raised her head and called, "I have travelled a long way and bested the midnight forest. Please, I implore you, let me speak with Moon."

Blues, purples and oranges swirled in the pinpricks of starlight. She filled her lungs with lavender scented air. Her heart ached. It had been so long since she had smelt lavender. A star sparked, shooting across the sky and landing before her, a roaring fire. Fox huddled closer to the heat, fur steaming as she dried.

The world had grown so big since she had last seen it. City lights covered the horizon like sunrises, illuminating the forest. She did not know whether she would be welcome, or whether the world had simply moved on without her.

“Please,” her voice barely a whisper, “are you listening?”

Moon did not appear.

The fire lasted a week. Fox spent every night pleading, whispering, and yelping at the sky until her voice scratched like sandpaper. Finally, when the last of the embers waned, Fox turned her back on the world and slunk into the midnight forest, which welcomed her with open arms.

Still here (Shortlisted) - K Foster

Vivienne pointed to her usual space in front of the window. The care home staff had tried to involve her in the daily activities but each time Vivienne shook her head and pointed to the window, staring out of it for hours. Tears pricked her eyes as she silently recollected her life. If only the staff and other residents could hear inside her head they would see that she had lead a wonderful life. How she longed to tell her stories, to laugh again. But the stroke had cruelly robbed her of that. Now she felt humiliated and weak. She did not want pity, so she kept herself away and relived her past in isolation.

Hester had arrived in the country two months ago with only basic English language skills. The students in her class had made her feel welcome, and she tried hard in school, appreciative of the opportunity to learn. Her teachers noted that she was old beyond her years. She had a seriousness and maturity that came only with the experiences that Hester had had. Experiences no one, especially not a young girl should have had.

The school bus pulled up outside the care home. The school had joined a local project to help bring old and young together. The students excitedly climbed out, looking forward to the afternoon playing, reading, singing and dancing with the friends they had made on their previous visits.

It was Hester's first visit. She took the hand of her teacher, who led her into the large living room, alive with talking and laughing. Looking around they could only see one resident currently without a school buddy. Hester and her teacher walked over to the woman staring out of the window.

"Hello, this is Hester. She would like to sit with you today. Is that ok?"

There was no response.

A care home worker walked over and started talking to Hester's teacher. "Vivienne had a stroke recently. She's still recovering and doesn't really like company..." As they continued talking, Hester walked over to Vivienne, gently touched her hand, smiled and said a quiet hello. She sat down and got her drawing pencils and book out. She studiously started drawing a picture. When it was done, she placed it on Vivienne's lap.

"For you."

Vivienne looked at the sweet little girl, and then down at the picture. It was of a flower. A gesture of kindness, not pity. Although Vivienne's mouth could not move in the way she wanted, the emotion in her eyes showed all the gratitude she wanted to display and a beaming smile broke out across the little girls face.

"I'm Hester. What's your name?"

She handed Vivienne a piece of paper and pencil. Vivienne shakily wrote “Viv” on the paper.

“I sometimes find it hard to talk too Viv. I think we should be friends.”

Vivienne nodded. Hester sat next to her and grabbed her hand, as they looked out of the window together.

Having Time to Question Things - B Walker

Staying at home in isolation for three weeks, then six weeks, because of the coronavirus pandemic seemed to be sensible at the time. We were told that the virus had a life of only 10-15 days so, if we stayed at home it would die out for lack of new victims. Those people who had to leave their homes for work or necessary food shopping, could get tested if they showed symptoms, and would self-isolate if the test proved positive. Sound policy!

Being isolated gave me time to research pandemics: Spanish Flu, Asian Flu, Avian Flu, Swine Flu, HIV/Aids and Ebola. Then it occurred to me that in previous pandemics such draconian measures had never been taken against the people.

After a short period of limited freedom, we were subjected to yet another lock-down and told we were to blame because we had not been cautious enough.

I continued my research and came across a 2020 webcast by the World Economic Forum. The WEF brings together 3,000 of the world's elite business-people and politicians annually to discuss the global economy and ***pretend they're willing to share it.*** Membership is incredibly expensive (and no longer published), but in 2011 was \$527,000 for “Strategic Partners”. Admission fees were about \$19,000 per person. Far too expensive for the average man! Multi billionaires such as Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos, however, meet with royalty and politicians to ‘make the world a better place’. The WEF Motto is, in fact: “Committed to improving the state of the world”. ***But for whom?***

WEF members, however, have not been elected to change our world: they have secretly appointed themselves as our masters in order to fulfill their own agendas.

In 50 years of meetings, WEF themes have included gender equality, social equality, climate change: definitely worthy causes, but little has changed except the ***ever increasing wealth gap*** between its members and the rest of the world.

The subject for the June 2020 virtual meeting was, “The Great Reset”. In his introduction, Klaus Schwab (the CEO) proposed that they should use the coronavirus pandemic as “an important ‘opportunity’ for many of the World Economic Forum’s members to enact their radical transformation of capitalism. Every country, from the United States to China, must participate, and every industry, from oil and gas to tech, must be transformed. In short, we need a great reset of capitalism,” said Schwab.

Prince Charles added, “We have a golden opportunity to seize something good from this crisis. Its unprecedented shock waves may well make people more receptive to big visions of change. It is an opportunity we may never have again.”

More than twelve months have passed since that first lock-down. Each time there appears to be some hope of normality, it is dashed by another “wave” or “strain” of virus; and this is happening on a coordinated global scale.

So, I have to ask myself, ***“Is ‘The Great Reset’ already happening? If so, do we really want it?”***

Untitled - K Hockney

Everyday as the days go by, hour by hour.

The sun sets to sleepless nights.

Thoughts flowing back and fourth, judgements and regrets.

The hurt expressing it's hateful self inside and out in ways that are so alien to the mind and body itself.

How much?, Before it's too much?

The sun rises to another beautiful day, but what is out there waiting to take a piece of you?

What could be lost?

More fire, more flare, thoughts becoming rampant to bare. Will this ever end?

The pieces that were, are no more.

Trying to fill the emptiness but everything leads to you. Every beat, every breath, everything she does is from her head and her heart to fill those shoes that he is yet to walk in.

Days have turned into months. Yet time is at a standstill. No-where to go and longing to see him however the cards that were played, dealt a new way of life.

From dusk until dawn in an instant you were but a star, miles away, she can still hear you and see you but only from afar. The longing to touch is the pain she must bare. You're new beginnings are written for you, however the cards can always be replayed and somewhere in time it will be his turn to play.

As the time passes and stolen from her in one hand, the thoughts, the loneliness have given time in the other hand to plan for the future. The darkness that resides will always be there but it will be a distant memory once the light can shine through.

The darkness however payed its role and made her feel so powerless, so drained to the point of no return. There were no fight left and her guard was down. The darkness inside her made her feel so small and worthless, her heart on the other hand was too strong to back down from the fight and shone the light through all of the hurt and the pain. She was weak but her heart was strong to keep the future bright from this miserable state of mind. She started to tell herself the future is bright, there are too many goals to achieve and the path of destruction is going to be re-built for those shoes to walk away, from what was just a terrible nightmare.

The time lost will never be returned but the love was always there, eventhough it was felt that all and more was lost beyond repair. It was always there. All of her battles were not won and the war defeated her.

The emotions over time became too strong to take and in the end there was only one way out, but the true love she held for three little boys showed her true brightness in the darkness that's been lived. These perfect souls were once more the brightness of her smile, her laughter and again she was whole. All her lost pieces were back together again.

Untitled - Njoki

Sometimes my loneliness is from choice
I do not want to talk to anyone
I do not want to see anyone
I stay behind closed doors
Until my blues fade away
Then I am ready to face the world
And give a hug and smile to my loved ones
Who for a short time were not my loved ones
But when my blues lifted this time
I could not see anyone
Because we had to keep safe
My need to be hugged and have a laugh
Was turned into a desperate desire to survive
What many do not know is that
When the blues lift off
A void is left
That can only be filled with human touch
Not human face on a camera
Or a human voice on the phone
But the human touch
The neurons and hormones that are released
When two people come together
Starved of this medicine
I sit in frustration
I sit in pain
Emotional pain that exerts itself as anxiety
I feel my hands needing to do something
Anything
I shake them off vigorously
I grab a pillow and hug it under my chin
I fold up with my knees to my chest
I rock rock rock rock
Then I lift my head and the silence is louder than my heartbeat
I look at the clock
There are still several hours left before I go to sleep
I turn on the tv to keep my mind occupied for those several hours
I watch a cooking program
In the hopes to inspire me to cook a healthy meal that day
It works
I feel inspired to make a simple salad
I feel inspired to make a healthy meal
I eat as I watch tv
Glued to the screen

To momentarily take me away from the four walls
Which I must say have been shrinking
I take my tape measure
The measurement is still the same
It must be my mind that is shrinking
How to stop my mind from shrinking
I type on the internet
Many responses
I find people like me
I am not alone
I tell myself
I can do this
I can pull through
How my mind races
A wordsearch helps
A simple jigsaw puzzle helps
A great idea pops into my mind
I can take this time to declutter the whole house
I tip my drawers into one big pile
One by one I got through all my possessions
It's spring after all
I keep the donation box until I can take them to charity
I keep a recycling one
Hopefully my friend who drives can help me take it to the recycling centre
It is sunny today
I do loads of laundry
I mop the floors and vacuum the carpets
I go for a lone walk in the park
Strangers smile at me
They say hello
I say hello back
They may not have known that
They were the first real humans I have spoken to in a long while

The Man on the Moon - E Vincent

*

He isn't lonely, the man on the moon. I asked him last night.

Last month in school, we had to write a story about our time at home in lockdown. I started to write but the letters turned into alien shapes, orbiting the page. Mrs Stone said I'd have to go back a class. The others sniggered and stuck their tongues out again.

*

I heard Ma talking on the phone later. She said that I didn't have an ASD, I just had dyslexia. I asked her, after, what that was. She said it was a sort of condition that made it hard to write. I told her that can't be right, because nobody with dyslexia would be able to spell it. She said she had an idea.

*_**

I waited for full moon, then took Luna up onto the fell. She chased fireflies and I took out my torch, pointed my telescope at the moon's big face. One - two - three - four - Off. One - two - Off. Morse Code, the way Ma had shown me. She said I was made for Morse Code. The tiny blue light winked back at me straight away. H—E—L—L—O.

*_**

I waved my next story at Mrs Stone, beaming with pride. She saw the dots and dashes all over the page and she laughed and laughed. She said I must have my head in the clouds, and who on Earth was going to understand that?

Him. He asked me last night where the planes had gone. I explained that fewer were needed now and many weren't allowed to fly. He said he was sorry, because he liked watching those little wings flicker through the clouds. I said that some people are happy about them not flying and say that it's good for the Earth's health. Besides, they are very noisy, I add. He said he doesn't believe in ears anyway.

I was about to laugh, but then I thought instead. I asked him, isn't he less lonely now that the skies are clearer and he can see the earth? He said, no. The clouds make the earth shine more brightly. I kept my torch off, peering as hard as I could up to the shining, brilliant full moon, and tried to picture the old man, beaming with the glow from the Earth. For the moon knows, he said, when to share her light with the Earth in its darkness.

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