

Teaching the Death in Me How To Live

Poems and Stories during Covid-19/20/21 by Caroline Sanders



New Year

A star of Magi, the gilt-edged eclipse eternal returned.

Our house is on fire.

Blistered lineage seen by sage child.

But.

Protecting circle of gilded amber

Coiled round fluted charm,

We gather garlands of May blossom

In moments of love.

For us.

Morpheus

The grey harbour formed a scythe out to sea, harvesting the afternoon sunlight that cut without a sound. She stood at the tip of the scythe, gently swaying and staring towards the horizon. Her long russet hair blowing like blushing clouds in the breeze, embarrassed at being too bright for their surroundings and her mood. She wrapped a blue woollen shawl around her as if making herself a gift. She had not slept for seven nights, her dreams tormented by Morpheus's whispers that you are dead.

You should not have gone! You could have stayed with her. She has been waiting for you for three years. In love. Morpheus had been ordered by the Gods to visit her dreams and to tell her the truth. But she feared his words of death. It was too late for her. She had given so much to the waiting you see. She poured all her love into staying still, holding her breath, and slowing her heart. Measuring time in a sympathetic magic of needles of yarn and casting off.

Cast on.
Needles click tick tock.
Cast off.
Eye of wool hook lock.
Cast on.
The evil eye peacock .
Cast off.
Eye of rope from the dock.
Cast off.
Cast off.
Cast off.

It was a beautiful sailing boat. A dolphin blue smile at the prow greeted the sea as it splashed in celebration across the deck. You wanted to go. You wanted to see the world, as if it had been an object given to you on your birthday, as an object to inspect, an object to collect. An inheritance. How could you not know that the world is something that we create every day with every action we make. That the world is a relationship. A conversation. A feeling. A lucid dream we can change. That the world is alive with danger and passion, a wolf that will eat you up if you stare at it too long. If you fool yourself you are an observer, a collector. If you fool yourself you are a wolf hunter.

And so you set sail, and she watched from the harbour. Her hair blowing away from her. Like her hopes. And her dreams. She was sad that day. The tears washed her pale skin whiter like bones. She promised to wait, and you reassured that you would come back to her with jewels and treasure and stories and love. And marriage. You laughed with excitement as you dreamed of the adventures ahead,

and she thought you were laughing with joy at love for her. But you were lying. You wanted to steal and plunder and find yourself a kingdom to rule. You were not coming back, but wanted an easy escape. You did not want her anger to get in the way of your joy. She was an object in service for you. You thought nothing of her waiting silently for you. You did not know that she could stop her heart from beating so fast. You did not know her.

As the boat dipped under the sun into darkness your dreams became nightmares and the wolves howled in anger at your vanity and ignorance. The Gods delivered their verdict in your punishment and death. The storm whipped into a tempest and Poseidon dragged you into his sea-sick grave. But the Gods did not know her love either. Each day they watched her cast her evil eyes to ward away the demons. They watched her walk in half death along the harbour wall. They heard her sigh, and watched her cold breath shroud her face. They met in anguished pity for her hope. After three years they told Morpheus he must visit her dreams and tell her the truth. He did. She stopped sleeping.

I watched her from the harbour as she stood at the tip of the scythe, where the harbour cuts the sunshine dead. She wrapped the blue shawl around her as if making herself a gift. She had stopped sleeping since Morpheus had visited in her dream to tell her the truth. You were dead. You were never coming back. You had lied. You had never intended to return.

She did not want Morpheus whispering horrors in her dream. She refused to listen and refused to sleep. She was scared. She ran away. But fear and exhaustion brought change. Her heart beat faster, her breath became hotter and she could not be still. She ran in circles, in a spiral, and her skin grew rosy. She found herself on the harbour wall looking at the horizon. She found herself awake and she found herself feeling again.

So I watched her as she watched the sea below the harbour wall. Like a serpent it coiled and hissed at her to go away. She could feel the rage of the Gods. Rage at your arrogance and vanity. At your deception and your disrespect. She felt the rage. She understood why Morpheus had visited her dreams. To save her. With delight I saw her turn from the horizon and walk towards me, although she did not know I was there. Morpheus would not need to visit her dreams again. I could see that the truth had set her free. In each step she discovered a different world of richer colour, of sweeter smell and of deeper love.

And you lie there stuck on a bed of pink coral at the bottom of the deep blue sea. The fish stroke your skin, and the seaweed binds your hair and your gold coins surround you blinking like vanity mirrors. You are still. Your heart has stopped and you don't breathe. You have found your kingdom. It was an easy escape.

The World Turned Upside Down

Inside I feel the sea-surge deep in my belly.
The great white whale flips his tail and the boat
splinter-shatters on the beach.
But.
Your head is buried in the sand.
Eyes staring into darkness.
If thoughts float like clouds dripping into our heads like rain, then you will not
receive them with your head upside down.
The darkness leaks through your eyes into your heart and mind.
You are thirsty for it.
The salt.
Quenches nothing.

Inside I feel the forest-fires scorch in my heart.
The medusa monkey curls her tail and the screech bites into the tree.
And.
She bleeds.
The scarlet stream splutters into scabs.
If life floats on scented breeze, healing our wounds with soothing balm, then she
cannot feel it through her oozing scars.
Barren-black the tar swaddles her in a fossil-fuel cocoon.
She hangs.
Upside-down.
Feeling nothing.

Inside I feel the extinction howl in my head.
The grey wolf curses me and begs for food, her snarl mocking the hubris and the
pretension.
So.
I cannot feed her.
For we are upside down and I eat the air.
If hunger grows apple-tree pips in peat-soil then it is beyond my reach. It is dead
and nothing grows.
She yawns her mouth and I am inside black-squelch and silence.
I am wolf.
She is all.
The eternal returned.

The past

I am your amber
I am your past
You are stuck fast

You cannot escape
My blue-bottle fly
You cannot ask why

I will tell our story
I will tell my pain
I show them your shame.

Hide and Seek

“I’m coming ready or not!”
Not ready.
Inside wooden-panel flock rooms
aristocrat ego is massaged and groomed
slurping sherry.

“I’m coming ready or not!”
Not ready.
Soft carpets muffle the shame
of leaders playing bored and brutal games
of pride and envy.

“I’m coming ready or not!”
Not ready.
Around smooth mirrored table
reflecting vain lies that systems are stable,
strong and steady.

“I’m coming ready or not!”
Not ready.
Deny-me, “you did not count to ten!”
Old-gold corrupt faces bloated again
Spitting fury.

“Found you”
“Not ready!”
Illuminated by my sunlit street

Our communes of courage see-through deceit
Of tyranny.

A sonnet to Corona

If we must die, let it not be alone.
The pallid gasp for breath with mildewed eye
chalk-carved on fireplace in fear of the crone
On bleak Pendle hill we said our goodbye.

In paunchy parliament of dark magpies
they buried our treasures in obfuscation;
in tyrannies of words and laws and lies.
Stealing the commons, looting the nation.

But feeling the love within beating hearts
we gathered all our old rituals of spring
in circles and loops creating land-art.
A warning of spells and magical sting.

A kettle of hawks cannot make the tea,
A murder of crows should not be so free.

A Liminal Place.

There is a crossroads near here which has been etched into a flat-topped hill. The tracks on three sides create a wedge of earth, and this is where a maze was once carefully crafted by the local cunning women. It traced a spiral within the boundaries of the tracks. It was a circle within a triangle, and a spiral within a circle. Horses were traded in the adjacent fields, and raced each year on midsummer's day to please the local village folk. The ruined church beside the crossroads still totters precariously, clinging onto the ancient spring, from which the villagers once drank. The foundations and walls of the church are abandoned to an underground world of tangled roots. The hoary grove of Oaks, with the wise Sequoia tree in the middle, shunned those holy stones when it was built. The foundations of the church were always insecure. The cunning women could remember the time before the church, when it was their sanctuary. The ory waters washed their babies clean. The smooth, flat stones had shone crimson. They wondered whether that could have saved their children.

The women did not want the church to be built, but the priest gathered gold, along with prayers. The spring and the grove had been sacred to them, but gold was sacred to the landowner. One day a stone wall was built so high that they could not see the spring from the maze. They could not run to it and drink the clear, cold

water after losing themselves in the night. They could not wash their babies after 9 months. The priest told them when they could go to the church, and when they could collect drinking water in their buckets, for they were no longer allowed to stay and drink within the grove. It was the high wall that really kept them out. After dancing with their ancestors, they sat on their haunches in the maze, staring hotly at the spire.

Agnes was one of the growing number of women who spat on the wall each morning. The villagers were told to bury their dead in the church grounds, near the spring, behind the wall. She muttered obscenities under her breath as she collected the willow bark by the stream, for she believed the spirits were trapped behind that wall and could not get free. The willow was dying as the church foundations channelled the stream away. Later that morning the first child also died. He developed a panting fever, and vomited, before staring glass-eyed into the abyss. The willow bark did not work. He was four and his name was Charlie.

Charlie led a procession of dead children into the graveyard to lie by the spring. The adults often became sick but were spared by death herself. It was the children who were cursed. Agnes grieved. She left at sunrise each morning to pick the plants early washed in dew. She gathered her bindings, and traced the paths through the maze, muttering spells, sending hope. Nothing worked, and the children died. By the end of the year the village was barren of children. Their gravestones flashed like teeth in a greedy mouth.

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It was a full moon in April, and the cunning women of the village lit their fires on the maze, and ate their stew. This was the night they would call to the full moon and sleep with their visions as lovers. Eostre would appear to them as a hare, stretching her limbs into shielding knots to protect them. That night Agnes hounded Eostre across the night sky, and begged for her love and her help. The children were dead. She gave gifts of pastries and cream, and felt Eostre's sweet, milk-pudding breath fatten around her lips. In the morning they awoke as the sunlight burst like a weeping infant onto her sleeping mother.

The air hung still and silent during the afternoon that followed. The sun was now in middle-age, and he was gentle. The sorrow had been brushed away by the mare's tails high in the sky, and the children's spirits were hidden behind the church wall. Their death was all absence and emptiness. Their parents could not kiss them in the maze, or play chase with them, as Agnes could with her own dead. Today was Easter Sunday and the villagers had been summoned to a new Christian festival of resurrection. They reluctantly readied themselves for church. The more optimistic among them wondered if they would finally see their children again within the church walls. The rest were angry.

The village marched together as comrades enraged at the theft of their common land. At the death of their children. The trees nodded in solidarity, the birds singing a song of revolution. They each understood birth, death and rebirth as threads woven into the ecological web that connects all living things. Woven into the fabric of the earth, of the universe. There had always been hope and acceptance within grief. There was both the promise beyond individual spirit and connection with that spirit. No-one could comprehend this empty kind of grief. A possessed and captured spirit was like a fly bound in silk and hanging loosely from a thread. Separate.

As they entered the grounds of their sacred spring, they saw ridges of chalk white bones piled like deadwood fires. Like the fires prepared on Sahmain. Fires to ward off evil, and to celebrate the dead. Rabbit warren holes; deep and peat dark, hollowed the graveyard into grim exhumations. The rabbits had pulled and kicked the bones out of the black flesh of the earth as if those bones were poisoned arrows, gouging and wounding her body. They had tunnelled vast iatric underground chambers in which to apply soothing balms of flowers, honey and perfume to the rotting ground. Leverett burrowed temples were well known as places to commune with spirits. The underground temples had demanded sacrifice of the church which had been cleaved in two. The eastern side, with the gilded altar, had sunk heavily into the soft ground near the spring and the grove. Most of it was now underground, although some stones lay scattered like crumbs after a feast. The villagers stopped in alarm for fear of falling and hurting themselves. It was a monstrous, but a heroic sight.

The priest had fled at dawn as the church floor slid from under his feet, and the insecure foundations slithered down into black rabbit chambers. He lived in constant fear of the Devil, and in that moment was granted a wondrous gift, as his belief was confirmed. The church was dragged down into Hell itself. The church moaned, clutching onto the skirts of it's pitiful remains in shame at the hubris, seen clearly by all. Theft of the commons was revealed finally as blatant and treacherous. The villagers took the cursed stones from the outside wall and piled them into sacred barrows, channeling the spring water back to the earth. The men of the village lit fires of the bones which crackled and hissed, as the mothers wept.

I can see it all clearly from the crossroads on this flat topped hill. The firelight licks the sky with crimson spit. I sit crouched on my haunches in this liminal place, this temporal threshold. The church, the spring, the burial grounds. I stare with hot eyes. I hear the sound of children's laughter around me and the words of wise old Agnes blowing towards me on lanterns of apple blossom.

“Remember this. Only a fool would bury their dead by the spring, and poison the drinking water. Only a tyrant would kill our children, and build a wall to keep us

out, and the dead in. Walls lead to ever more fearful lives and empty deaths for human beings. Resurrection is a lying promise. There is no eternal human life in Heaven. Separate. Like a fly hanging from a web. The tyrant's life is fearful and possessed, with a miser's promise of an impossible future.

Our life is a carnival of radiant reds, and beetle blues, of smoke-smells and sweet plum puddings that cling to your tongue. A life of eye-wrinkled laughter and sickening sorrows. We have but this one life to feel the ache in our heart. We must live, and love, and be free. When it comes time for our flesh to be eaten by crows, our spirits will walk the eternal spiral giving breath to the natural world, and Eostre will burrow temples underground and light fires of our bones.”



Fig. 7. Maze at Boughton Green, Northamptonshire.
Diameter, 37 feet.

We Will Decide

The number of our dead is still rising.
No longer my destiny but ours.
Feeling our pain of the ones in hiding,
mourning without funeral and flowers.

They stir souls with talk of battle and war
but their strategy was made months ago

in cruel-cold losses, of thousands or more.
Just a key worker martyrs clapping show.

“Lest we forget” is a remembrance lie.
Class amnesia that power corrupts,
and so when I let them decide for my
life, they steal my fate as theirs to disrupt.

They cannot tell me what it’s right to be.
They cannot tell me when I can be free.

Mayday

I can only see her blue-washed eyes
Peeping scared over mint clean mask.

We celebrate workers day and Beltane
with our bonfires of the vanities.

We have chosen our new May Queens.
They are lighting fires on Westminster Bridge.

Sonnet to the Small things.

I like big theories, and philosophy.
I like connections, communication.
I like maps, the paths, the wood not the trees.
I like the love affair, not flirtation.

I blow dust puffs into Brownian cloud.
I swirl Varanass-stole pyred tea leaves.
I light candles of truth and Hermes is cowed.
I watch Kropotkin’s bread rise like Hood’s thieves.

The small tasks count the seconds of each day.
The small things absorb me and my focus.
The small breath anchors me, helps me to stay.
The small moment grounds me, offering locus.

Discover again; as below so above
I swirl this tea, this dust, with sacred love.

The High Ground.

It is high ground where the gallows were hung, and the sacred spring bubbled free. A place of life and death. The small market town lay below sprinkled like crumbs for birds. The church steeple stood tall and alone in pride and shame whilst the stadium lights gathered in a circle to gossip. They look small and distant from here.

It is difficult to describe the land. It has no known geometric shape. It is a patchwork of scrub and grassland guarded by tall sentinel Poplar trees, where wizened medieval hedgerows guide the ancient paths. The edges are blurred because it is a place where life and death meet, and that is always true of such places. Some people walk through the long grass without realising they are here. Some have never heard of this place. The rest of us discuss better signage to make it more clear. It will never be clear though, even to those that walk its paths each day. An unboundaried, torn off scrap of common land, impossible to own or trespass; incoherent, uncurated, and foggy.

I like to walk the hedgerow at the very peak of the land. I like the clarity of the sharp torture of the spikes, and the clear boundary. It wakes me from the soft daydreaming quality that wraps around the trees and scrub. Sometimes I have to rub my eyes as it feels everything is soft focused. The tall, hunter green Poplars seem to brush the clouds out of the sky onto the grass. If I follow the hedgerow I find myself in a small field of lemon-green grassy tussocks. It's a soft bed to lie on here and watch the clouds wander across the vast blue sky, tracking my thoughts, and mood. Sometimes a shy deer will twitch with curiosity as she blinks in the sunlight before retreating to her hide.

The golf club had owned the land thirty years ago, and had wanted to sell it for housing development. The local community had endured a long fight but had won the land from the club, and it remained as natural space for everyone. It is the commons. A place for all. Dogs take their owners there so they can meet the other dogs. Children take their parents there so they can make mud pies and climb trees. It has the tranquility of twilight. A space for animals and children with no responsibilities, and no work to do, and for adults to lose themselves.

The owner of the golf club was a man called John Mckenzie. He was a middle-aged property developer. John had made himself a lot of money from his businesses. He bought up houses, warehouses, flats, and renovated them cheaply before renting them out at high profit. When it came to his golf club, however, his usual prudence always deserted him. John found generosity irresistible in the golf club, and he found himself there every day of the week engaging in the swagger of society. Needless to say, his profits dwindled, and finally his accountants insisted he must sell off part of the golf course land. John's shame at having to sell some of the land was tempered by his further ingratiating with the golf illuminati that this sell-off

provided. The brandy and port deals for housing developments took place on the balcony overlooking the first hole. Everyone was happy. John made money and everyone made money.

The golf club society, along with John, had forgotten the local residents though. Like all small societies the golf club was insular and wrapped up in their own stories and entitlements. They bathed each day in their privilege, and thought nothing of it. It was John's land to sell. The political landscape, however, had changed with a Labour government installed after eighteen years. John hadn't noticed. The local residents mobilised, and one day they found a rare purple orchid nestled in the long grasses of a field. This small, scraggy flower was protected by the golden grasses, and protected by the environmental laws in the golden courts. It was enough to save the land from development. It became common land, owned by no-one and returned to the trees.

John was devastated. He had lost a lot of money, but more than this, he had lost status. He felt deeply ashamed. He blustered about the unfairness, the loony left, that he would keep fighting, and that it wasn't his fault. But he could feel his privilege draining away. He became the small child wetting himself in front of the class. He stopped going out, and sat on his own at home every evening lost in paperwork and accounts.

There are two stories told about what happened next. The first story is that he became gloomy and isolated after the decision. He was near bankruptcy, and one dark evening walked to where the gallows had stood on the old land, and hung himself from a tree. It's a tragic tale and is used as a warning for property developers of the dangers of environmentalism. They shake their heads in the golf club as they remember the injustice.

The alternative story is different though. It tells of John being enraged by the discovery of the rare and protected orchid. They say he spent the evening drinking whiskey at home before storming up to his land in search of the purple flower. He scythed the land in a wild rage. He harvested the long green grasses bowed with seeded pods, tree branches that hung low with plump-blushing fruits, and the nests of fur and fluff. He set fire to them in a Lammas sacrilege of anger and destruction.

That night people heard the land breathe a deep belly sigh, and the wind howled down local chimneys in fury. The earth shook and residents woke at about 3 am in the morning as ornaments fell from cabinets, and dogs whimpered. The next day they discovered that a small earthquake had happened. John was found hanging from a tree that same morning. The police report notes that he was hung by the tendrils of tree branches from the sentinel Poplars that guard the land. He was not hung on Poplar but an Ash, and no-one understood how the tendril could have

been strung between the trees on which he was hung. It could not have been by a human hand anyway. Many of the locals say the trees made their judgement that night. Those trees that live on the high ground.

The Walking Dead.

The frogs are still in our pond.
I mean they are still
In our pond.

Under the green-sludge surface.
They breath cold and slow
Don't surface.

Knowing to move is to die.
On the day that is.
Some must die.

It's like when we hold our breath.
So that we aren't seen.
Bursting breath.

It was games of hide and seek.
I learnt to be quiet.
Not to seek.

It comes in useful sometimes.
When you are angry.
Still sometimes.

I am skilled at noticing.
Without being seen.
Noticing.

In the dusk gloom of moon light,
Our frogs hop free and
air feels light.

So heavy to hide away.
Invisible wants
put away.

As a child I learnt this game.
Watch and be still. I
learned this game.

The Story of Levellers

1

A gale bended-branch knocked at his door,
asked this soldier to come out.

He was lost in a desperate knuckled thought,
carving his name in granite stone
so I know he made a stand.
So there could be no doubt.

He carved his own honest headstone
trapped in Burford's spindle-spired church.

Three soldiers in Cromwell's army,
three levellers they were.
They had chased down Boudicca's road
forcing Cromwell's army search.

A mutiny against the Oath of Sarum
when once gathered were not paid.

The gale had whipped at hollow cheeks
blowing thoughts of change
of freedom, fairness and a different world.
A levelling that was betrayed.

2.

A gale bended-branch knocked at my door
Asking me to come out.

I could hear the clapping-cheers encore
though I was locked-in stone.
I thought of you trapped in that church
whilst hearing comrades shout.

Again the poorest risk carved out lives
without a paternal protector.

Again I watch hope swirl like smoke
hiding open wounds of truth,
and hear words of fairness, levelling and care.
Balms of soothing nectar.

Yet old Sarum has cut my pitiful-pay.
At 8 o'clock I cast this spell.

We risk our lives for these iron men
obedience to their deceit
But like then as now we wish they were
all to burn in Hell.

Summer Solstice 22:43 pm

The longest day waits to cast her shadow.
She washes gossamer in sunlight pools
that drip-drip upon blood-honey meadow.
Minotuars maze where we wed him like fools!

Eight minutes forty-six seconds to choke.
Forest feasting fires, burning tower.
We can read the signals in bitter smoke
on a dying planet, in the final hour.

The great greenwood Oak whose roots burrow deep,
shelter Ariadne's spinning of rope,
to twine-wind our paths free, as we weep.
We cry for our mother, a final hope.

Solstice fires light the darkness til dawn.
Spinning us round, a new future is born.

Children

I have collected shells and teeth
in chewing gummed pockets
and in the lines of a seam.
They are friction in my grief.

I display them on a shelf
in a bottle of cobalt blue
and in my old tobacco pots.
I am proud of my wealth.

I never did like sewing up holes
but I keep a wicca basket
and my body bleeds.
I was stitched in timely patrols.

I iron where the socks are spread
but I melted the rag-rugs
and glued your names inside.
You won't get lost now. Or dead.

I have skin that's been burnt
in the silent oven fire
and in the steam-soak of a kettle.
They were hard lessons learnt.

I once wove dollies of golden corn
in a cold grey school room
and you two breathing inside me.
It was the day you were born.

Teaching The Death In Me How To Live

The crunch under oak, the sigh of breeze.
are gentle chimes to secluded reflection.
September soothes with fat fruiting trees.
We hop-skotch to school clutching confections.

For fifty-three years I change with the leaves,
each year gifting a new consolation.
The cuckoos steal south with my youth like thieves,
But this year I watch with adoration.

Each moment long passed I fill with my love.
Grateful and hopeful eternal returned.
Each friend I have known I wish you my love.
Grateful and hopeful eternal returned.

We must teach the death in us how to live.
For this is the wisest gift we can give.

Grandma

I remember visiting monsoon washed lands.
Bathing in the sweet perfumed air,
submerging.
Firecracker burst and marigold garlands,
were the rituals to my privilege purging.

My grandfather had been war-stationed there.
I played with his colonial remnants.
A toy dog;
rough, tough, and stroked threadbare.
Making stories with your fetish pendants.

I loved your home grandma. Rich with your love.
Clementine velvet and
horse-nuzzle hugs.
Glass droplets scattered the light from above.
Muffled with tip-toes sunk deep in the rugs.

The steam train puffs rosy clouds to obscure.
Still I heard the protesting
chai seller's moan.
I paid the price for a travellers tour
to drink the sugar-milk tea we once shared in your home.

Sky

Tortoiseshell backed long dog
snuffle-sniffs her nose through dewy fog.
Her gazelle glance hunts my gaze
searching safety in her primal ways.

Cloud clears, and ear-yarn twitches
a-front alert, poised in still breath stitches.
She languishes-lazy, sofa stretched,
legs flagged with white fringes. Ball fetched.

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