

## Pandemic Blues Day 43: In Which I Invite the Germs In

I busy myself making  
sourdough starter,  
involving ingredients I don't have  
to shop for – flour and water, and hope  
a few sympathetic microbes will fly  
into my kitchen alive and ready to work,  
leaven this flat feeling that our lockdown  
could last what's left of my life. I'm doing whatever  
keeps me from sleeping  
all day, drinking too much.  
On YouTube the helpful man uses just  
a measuring cup, eschews  
a digital scale and all its romantic precision.  
*Just eyeball it, leave something to chance* he says.  
This recipe for anarchy, his casual approach  
suits me fine. I think of all the things  
you can do just enough –

like a life – chug along for years without a plan,  
dump tinker toys onto the carpet  
knowing a few pieces are lost,  
make what you can  
or take a road trip in an old car  
with squiggly-line signs to warn you  
of the cliff, but not when you'll meet it.  
A carefree journey marked  
by ambiguous symbology, open to interpretation  
open to hope –

So when the gloppy mess goes rancid after a few days  
I pour it down the drain, mix a new batch of chaos,  
lid the jar loosely, open a window,  
welcome the air from outside, hope  
for a different outcome.

## The Receipt

In May the call came, your echoing voice  
lifting the fog of gone years,  
introducing yourself as if  
I would no longer know  
the voice from behind me in chemistry class.  
Where was it, did I have it,  
the receipt for the plot we bought  
back when we planned deep for the future –  
the unmarked piece of grass shadowed  
between your mother and the sun.  
New cemetery owners, records lost, you said  
and you had an immediate need, for your sister,  
her death a light you saw coming at you.  
I had to remind you I didn't  
have it, I left with nothing.

July, after you buried her somewhere  
else, my pocket buzzes with a texted photo,  
the lost paper, a two-dimensional flicker on a flat screen,  
you want me to see you found it –  
proof the parcel is ours still. I picture the spot,  
a smear of green sideways to a mound  
of soft sun-dried dirt, all we hoped for  
gradually settling, sinking. I texted back  
*Great news! Happy it can be used some day.*

We both knew it would lay there forever,  
*Yes, hope not too soon LOL,*  
nothing more to say, edges of  
torn-open lives now left to close again,  
the texts trailed off in colorful emojis  
slipping, scrolling & disappearing as the screen  
dissolved in icons for weather and time.

## The Load

If you've ever had  
a wooden clothes hanger  
broken, cracked  
across your back  
as you ran  
from your mother  
who was trying  
to sleep it off on a Saturday morning,

or ever spanked your child,

consider now,  
the full house still in bed,  
my daughter –  
holding her toddler son  
who has cried himself  
into hysterics  
can't stop,  
gasps for air –  
whispering  
her soothing words  
into his matted hair  
his salty face,  
for half an hour  
until he stops the hiccups  
shudders and goes limp  
in her arms,

then you might see  
the circle – the chase  
through the house  
down the hall  
through the kitchen  
through the dining room  
the living room  
back down the hall  
past her bedroom –  
has been broken,  
and sense the weight,  
the dense leftover sting  
on your shoulders,  
is maybe gone  
for good.

## That Christmas in California

A month later I ignored the pleadings of my credit card and bought last-minute tickets to where my kids' aunts and uncles had put down roots, where they became parents themselves, our brooding tree spread out like a branch of hot Celtic lightning, subjecting the locals to crackles of Long Island accents and attitude, and where they stayed awake, kept their kids up, sat at the airport or around lighted palm trees, waited for us to land safely, which we did, after five hours in the air, somewhere around midnight, ignoring caroling back East, after spending a frantic hour looking for long-term parking, after rushing through a quiet terminal, joining late planners, students fresh out of finals, ethnic outliers, and others too spent to do anything for the holidays but lie in the arms of close relations, after we walked into the cleaned-up undersold cavern of a jumbo jet, spread out, settled into separated seats under reading lights dim as campfires on a hillside, after we looked out at the stars and tried to forget that this had shaken us like a 5 a.m. tremor, spilled us out of bed and worked loose our bolts, that we were not whole any more, that nothing would be the same, that the bounding teenage boy who ruined us with his lovely annoyances, his unrelenting ball-bouncing, tongue-clicking, big-sister-teasing grins – was not with us, would never again be with us...and we were desperate for family.

## The Harbor, Finally

My sisters wheeled  
my father's bed into the living room so  
he could feel the sun, look out, watch the seaside golfers  
drive long balls into the blue and drop  
into the fairway of mounding jade waves.

Bit by bit he was slipping,  
releasing the grip on his anger at all of us  
and my mother, who seized the wheel years ago  
steering to a swell of monthly worries,  
aging hospital bills, holy books,  
and canceled tee times. He accepted  
how his course was mapped by rhythmic tides  
and sermons from the unknowing.

Now my mother rested by his bed,  
her constant hand lying on his,  
holding the pulsing ache of the years, gazing  
past his fading eyes, out to the green sea.

He finally understood  
these accidental adults in this worn out house,  
our whispered laughs echoing summer swims,  
here by choice, thanking him, controlling our goodbyes,  
plunging into the necessary, as we  
swabbed our family vessel, filling the hull with reconciliation,  
sweeping over the bow decades of  
dredged-up golf balls and counterweights.

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