

fragments*Meaghan Delahunt*

i'm happy but i miss people,

i miss

when we come out of this,

will i

will it

will we

will

the world

shrinks

to my much-washed palms

a pandemic disrupts the grammar of a life. the idea of the future, the idea of the past and the present. the active becomes passive – we're now objects 'done to' by the virus. old-school grammar and linear illusions fall away.

here, the fragment comes into its own.

i embrace the fragment in-and-of-itself and i gather the fragments to form a different sort of whole.

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beginnings

when it started, i was on the third draft of a book about mothers and daughters, death and creativity. as the year progressed, i just couldn't get back to this book about death. a number of friends lost their mothers (and fathers). a dear friend died very suddenly of cancer. the live streamed funeral became commonplace.

when it started, i thought i'd carefully record each day. this is important, i told myself. take note. everyday life is now part of the historical record. honour it.

that was my intention but i couldn't sustain it. i got covid during this period and struggled to focus, but in any case, the meticulous recording of life-as-it-was-lived became tedious. after six weeks of lockdown, i gave up. my journal barely notes what was happening to me, let alone to anyone else.

boris johnson in hospital was about it.

at this time, i became fixated on the news, immersed for hours in online newspapers. while i became more and more outraged by the everyday troika of covid, trump and brexit, a friend rang to say that she completely avoided the news and was reading all of henry james.

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the good doctor says

*dr. rieux decided to write the account...so as not to be one of those who kept silent, to bear witness...*¹

the fiction of the 20th century barely mentions the 1918 spanish flu epidemic. hemingway, fitzgerald, gertrude stein, orwell all lived through it. freud lost a daughter in its third wave. fifty million people died worldwide, yet there is little mention of this in writers' letters, diaries or novels of the period. and yet, although fewer people died, we have numerous accounts of the great war.

after a year of the current pandemic, as a fiction writer, i completely understand why.

war is tumultuous. it involves danger and excitement. it is the business of men and the enemy is clear. there's a designated arena of conflict: outdoors. there is an army. there are forward marches, drone strikes, bombs, retreats. each day, something different; dramatic, heroic and dangerous.

a plague is tumultuous, but it is also incredibly boring. it is endured indoors. it is domestic. largely, it's viewed as women's business: to care for the sick, to school the children, to provide food, to clean the house. it is mundane and repetitive work. the enemy is in the air we breathe, the people we are close to, the surfaces we touch. it is airborne and invisible. no drone strike can kill it. there is nothing dramatic or heroic about sheltering indoors with women and children. *the great gatsby* is not set during quarantine, for a reason.

¹ The quotes in bold italics in this section are from Albert Camus, *The Plague*, Penguin Classics, London, 2013

during the daily routine of the first lockdown – exercise once a day, shopping once a week, the regular cleaning of surfaces, the eternal washing of hands and masks — who had the energy or even the desire to write fiction, especially fiction about covid?

we have nothing left but statistics

dr. rioux walks with me to the shore. he's never been to leith and i've never been to oran, but as i'm re-reading *the plague*, he's now a constant companion.

re-reading, i'm simultaneously the catholic school kid – reading the book for the first time as a metaphor for evil and nazism – and the woman of mature years, reading it as a factual account of u.k. life in the covid-era.

on january 27, 2021 a friend writes: *the old folks' home over the road just played auld lang syne on the speakers and all the staff (and some public) were standing outside with their heads bowed. not sure whether it was to mark a long-term resident passing, or the atrocious landmark of 100,000 dead in this country. where are the rolling heads? "we did all we can." bullshit. i loathe them.*

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my friend's funeral was down near the scottish borders. i got a lift to the crematorium with a mutual friend. i sat in the backseat, masked. she sat in front, vaping while driving, with the window down.

after the service, my friend's god daughters came up for an illicit hug. we then went outside and hugged everyone else, all of us masked, careful to avert our faces.

the green hills brooded above as the empty hearse drove off.

we all carry the plague

it's how not to pass on the infection, dr. rioux maintains. *that's the issue*. he hands me an eco-wipe and together we swab telephones and doorknobs and remote controls and banisters. he tries

to wipe clean a large orange man, on the television screen. the man is the president of the united states and appears to be inciting riot.

but that will never come clean, says dr. rieux.

each of us has the plague within him

rioux says this as an angry white mob storms the capitol building in washington and we pause our cleaning to watch: mouths open, eco wipes hovering in mid-air.

and all the while, nothing more important happened than this great marking of time.

a neighbour in her 70s notes: *we're now all forced to think about our age; conscious of it in a way we weren't before.*

another friend says: *we're all just stuck at home, getting older.*

the daily walk; the nightly netflix; the weekly shop. people either still have work or they don't. there's not much in-between. the precarity of furlough makes people anxious. will they still have a job in six weeks, six months, when will furlough run out? people who still have work complain of exhaustion and sleeplessness, glued to computer screens all day. people who don't have work line up at food banks, apply for universal credit and/or wait for the government to give them a fraction of their former self-employed income. i apply to be a contact tracer and never hear anything back. a friend actually gets one of these jobs and starts work in a call centre near her home town. she works for a private company who've been granted a contract for nhs england. she has to tell the people she contacts that she's calling from scotland. she works 8am - 6pm in mask and gloves. she cleans the surfaces and door handles on the hour and shares a room with six other people, all socially distanced. in her other life, in the time before, she was a linguist and a language teacher but the pandemic hit and her classes evaporated. when she was first employed, the contact rate was around four people every four weeks. it was abysmal, she said. after christmas, and the relaxed restrictions down south, cases spiked and the call centre went into overdrive. her job description keeps changing. now she listens to stories of bereavement and heartache.

i'm glad i never got the job. but i would love to hear the stories.

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the ancients in leith

little drummer boy

time slows, it's no longer clock-time as before. now, even in cities, we notice the changes in sky and temperature and birdsong and leaves falling or buds emerging. this is natural-world time. the way our ancestors in caves understood it. as if we've emerged from a long meditation with our senses on high.

for some reason, i'm thrown back to primary school. we'd assemble each morning under the australian flag to sing 'god save the queen' – a tune i still despise – then march in formation to class. this was the 1960's. before we marched, we had to mark time, singing out: 'left– left– left– right– left', with one hand on the small shoulder in front of us, raising our knees, marching on the spot. and then the drummer boy would signal and we'd move off, swinging our arms in line to the sound of his drum. as if we were army cadets and not tiny, fragile humans. in summer, as we marched, the crates of bottled milk for our morning break curdled in the sun and the kids dropped like flies.

lockdown is the place in which i'm an ageing child, forever marching on the spot and never moving forward, cruelly deprived of the comfort of the shoulder in front.

doon yer tea and eat yer bread.

during lockdown – who knows which one? – this graffiti appeared all over leith in edinburgh. at first i think it's a protest against tory indifference. a sardonic commentary, in scots, on 'let them eat cake.'

i try to find out more about this graffiti, which appears in acid green, on bridges, hoardings, communal rubbish bins. what i discover explodes this revolutionary myth:

soccer casuals, states one comment on reddit.

the same people responsible for 'jesus sooks farts', says another.

five herons become two.

during the first lockdown, in march 2020, spring bloomed, the weather was warm, and on our daily walks i became entranced by lochend park in leith. half-submerged trees stand in the middle of the loch and i've always privately called it 'the drowned park.' now i become obsessed with its birdlife, in particular i'm entranced by the herons. in spring and summer i see five herons, all standing angled away from each other on different branches, like a dysfunctional family. the pandemic now impacts how i see the natural world: 'the socially-distanced herons', i say to myself. during winter, and after the loch freezes over, only two herons remain. who knows if the herons were all related? and what i long to know is this – where have the other three gone?

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i stop to read the notice on a beehive-shaped building near the loch. apparently, this 17th century dovecot was once used as a kiln for burning clothes in the great plague of 1645.

down on leith links, there's another memorial to the 1645 plague that killed half of edinburgh's population. in 2016, seventy-nine bodies were found in a mass grave beneath the playground of st. mary's catholic school on the links. in 2018, a funeral was held, attended by the schoolchildren, and the bones of the plague victims were finally laid to rest.

other plague-times

my greek teacher sends me pages from *the history of the peloponnesian war, book two*.

*this, then was the calamity which fell upon athens, and the times were hard indeed, with men dying inside the city and the land outside being laid waste.*²

thucydides describes the plague, which, like covid, affected all organs of the body. he evokes the denial, the misery, the conspiracy theorists, the difficulties of burial and of mourning. how the poor were disproportionately affected. like re-reading camus, it seems as if thucydides is writing about now; as if thucydides has come to leith.

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endings

it's spring again, marking a one-year cycle of lockdowns and the highest death toll in europe. a year in which vaccines were developed at speed and are now being rolled out across the world.

on sunday 28th february 2021, one of my sisters texts from melbourne, australia, where covid is almost zero and life is very different to here.

she'd been to a big party the night before and wrote in fragments which made me happy:

drinking bubbles and dancing,

²Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book Two, Penguin, London, 1972

today, sore feet and sore head.

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