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TW Contributors Respond to the Global Pandemic

Editor's Note: *It's been hard to find comfort recently, but when I do, it's through the creative expression of others. Like so many literary organizations, Talking Writing has had to take a step back in the early months of 2020. We've delayed our spring issue, but it will launch soon, and I appreciate the resilience of our writers and artists. Here, we've compiled responses to the coronavirus pandemic by a number of spring contributors, organized by genre in the upcoming issue.*

Please, all of you, keep envisioning a better world.

— Martha Nichols



Personal Stories

Kira Venturini

I've been struggling to start any new writing, being in the same space day after day, so I started looking back at my older journals for inspiration. I've found that reading through old writing can be helpful, whether picking up where you left off with something or reflecting on an old experience from a new perspective.

Nadia Ghent

I don't think that I am coping well or am able to use this radically refigured time to my best advantage by working on my book or writing poetry or a symphony or turning our shared adversity into my own creative engagement with the world. I'm not very good at leveraging disaster. It's as if we've all been forced to learn a new language that has only dire words in it: *ventilator, intubation, face masks, social distancing, viral load, quarantine, death*. Words we don't ever want to speak, and yet this is all that is being said. I'd prefer to sit in silence and let this language pass through me, a lingual violence that also makes me its victim. But I can't turn away from the despair that is hidden in this language, the suffering that is unquantifiable despite all the data (each data point a number, each number a person with a history and loved ones and likes and dislikes, a person who walked this earth) that washes over us daily.

And so I've turned to that clichéd panacea, which nevertheless is what binds me to the past and my mother: I've been baking. Not Flako Cup Cakes, long gone from grocery store shelves (along with today's flour, sugar, and eggs). And nothing that takes multiple steps or hours being tended to, like the sourdough bread recipe that's been everywhere on social media. I want something warm, buttery, and fast. By which I mean blueberry muffins, banana bread, brownies, yogurt-and-olive-oil cake, apple cake, pumpkin cake, chocolate cake, any kind of cake. Mostly I've been baking alone, missing my mother's presence and her steadying hand when things would go wrong. Everything has gone wrong, nothing can get fixed, but at least there's still the smell of something freshly baked for when my groggy family comes to the breakfast table or for after dinner when we're tired of tearing apart the day's political discourse and the endless what-ifs, and we need something sweet to make it through the night.

Steve Henn

I'm usually okay enough as long as the kids don't complain too much. Warm, sunny days are better. I find myself cycling through difficult memories a lot. I'm not entirely sure what to feel responsible for. I'm sorry this isn't very uplifting. Maybe tomorrow will be different.

Michele Popadich

I feel lucky that this strange and uneasy moment in time has actually given me a window into a head space untouched by the trivial concerns and shallow worries of my pre-pandemic life. My work has been braving new depths—unearthing richer despairs and comforts, simultaneously.

First-Person Reports

Keith Langston

The thing that's really inspiring me...is hearing all the cheering for first responders at 7 p.m. every night...

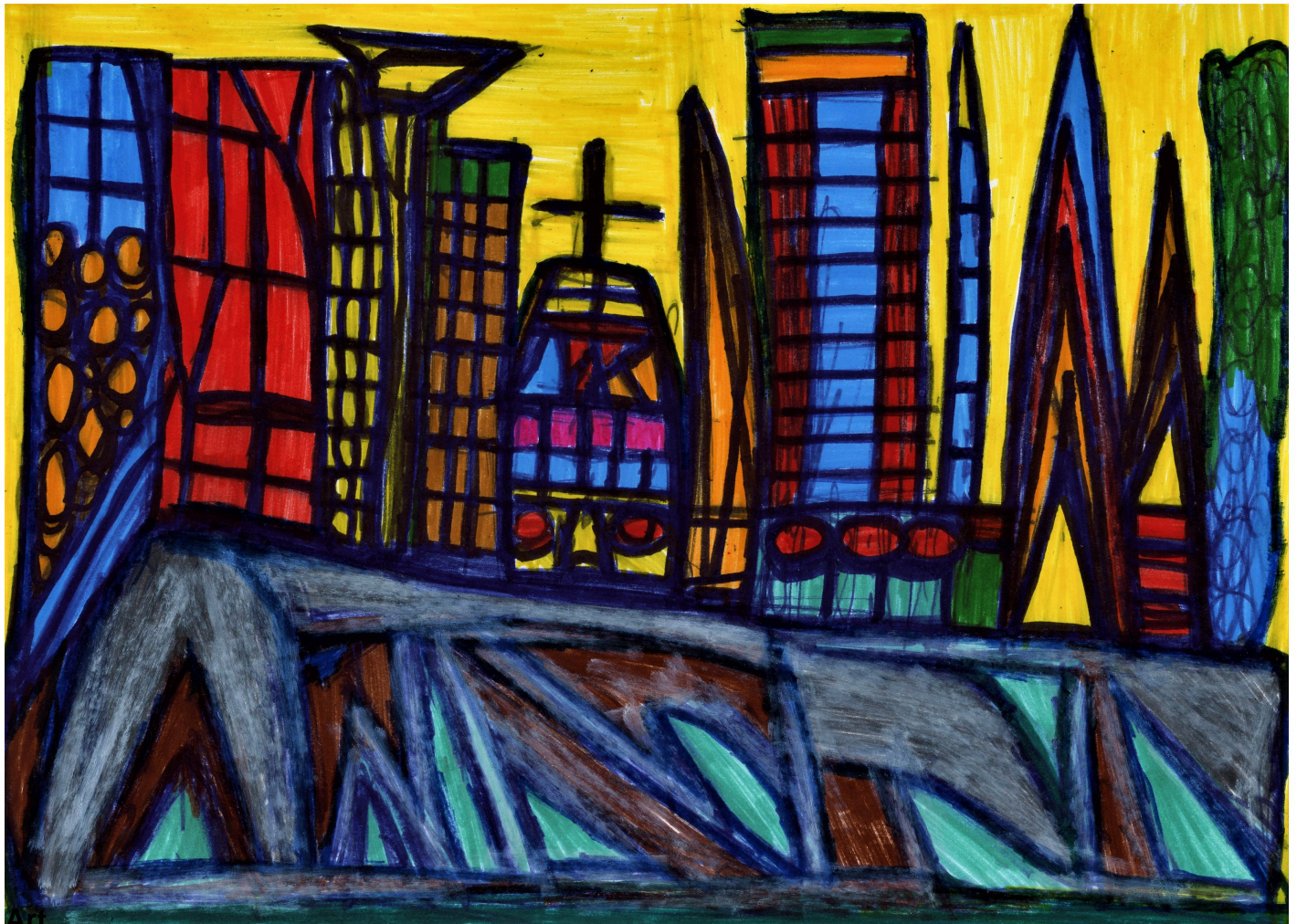
Interviews

Cristina Deptula

What I've noticed is that the words are still coming to me, but in a more direct and linear form rather than as traditional literary craft. In times of pandemic, I'm thinking like a journalist rather than as a poet.

What's keeping me sane is purposeful writing—for volunteer efforts and fundraisers in our community and elsewhere. Also reframing how I consider things—that is, this time at home is a chance to serve others by not spreading disease and also a chance to catch up on reading.

I'd say to others that if relaxation and self-care are what you need to do right now, go for it, no judgment. But if you feel a calling to rise up and write for a purpose—to publicize mutual aid efforts or participate in a benefit reading or encourage those around you or create a primary source history of what's going on—follow that calling! Plenty of unexpected, and expected, heroes rise up in times like these.



Darrell Urban Black

Everyone on this earth has a part to play in this tragedy, and no role is trivial...

Mercury-Marvin Sunderland

One of my closest friends died a slow and painful death by disease two weeks before my twentieth birthday this past summer. Living during a pandemic after losing someone to illness has been really difficult, and all I'm trying to do is survive. I've had a lot of death in my life recently—I also lost two of my other friends to suicide. The fact that not even my grandparents lived through a global pandemic makes it hard to control my fear of loss at a time like this. I've been making sure to use my DBT skills and to read, write, draw, study, and submit to literary magazines every day—and it helps. Being surrounded by so much death has taught me how important it is to do the things you live for.

Open Letters

Rita Kurtz

This moment seems like God is telling us, *That's enough! Everybody go to your room and think about what you've done...*

Translations

Martha Collins and Chung Nguyen Ba

One of the things we've been doing during this time in our homes is finishing up the translations for a book-length collection of poems by the Vietnamese poet Tue Sy, some of which appear in the forthcoming issue of *Talking Writing*. Written by a Buddhist monk who was imprisoned for 14 years, the poems themselves are a comfort. But the process itself is also a help. We're working diligently at our desks, concentrating right now on final translation problems. But as we email the poems back and forth to each other, we also have good company. We're fortunate to have this project and hope that others have similar good things to keep them occupied during this difficult time.

Writing and Faith (poetry)

Peter Bethanis

As writers, it is our responsibility not to write out of complacency, but out of a need to support, reflect, and be a voice for our community. The written word, on such occasions, not only shows us that we share many of the same struggles and worries, but that we are not alone and there is hope despite the many challenges in front of us.

Jenny Qi

I'm struggling to write anything coherent at this point, but I do find solace both in and outside of words. Early in the pandemic, I read (and was still able to write) a lot of poetry and obsessively kept up with COVID-19 updates. Now we're on Day 30 of sheltering in place in San Francisco, and I'm fortunate to remain in decent health and continue to work remotely. Lately, I've been escaping into historical fiction and mythology and painting, things I absolutely loved as a child but don't often allow myself to indulge in during "normal" life because they aren't immediately "productive." Now that time has lost meaning to a certain extent, I'm rediscovering the joy of stories and creation for their own sake and the reasons I started writing in the first place.

Jacqueline Schaalje

My Circle

I am coping pretty well under the circumstances. I eat more strawberries than usual. I've amazed myself how I can easily spend half a morning sending jokes to people I know, family or friends or WhatsApp groups. Shows you that it's not true what they always say, that giving is more satisfying and more important than receiving. Absolute nonsense. The whole point of giving and receiving is to keep the circle going. I think it's quite understandable why people like me who are normally hard at work, go a little overboard with the digital messaging. It makes no sense to close yourself off from others now. I receive a joke, laugh my head off, pass it on. If it's not in a language that the other person knows, I translate it.

I also like Zoom compilations with singers in different locations. One was of opera soloists singing *La Traviata* about how the sun is shining, but they can sing to their fridge. (I think that should be into their fridge.) I became totally and helplessly mesmerized by how, on the beat of the music, a lamenting opera singer pulls latex gloves from a box. The latex gloves are quite a scary thing by themselves. Normally, when someone pulls a latex glove on me, I'd have to think that the end is near. But the operatic pulling of gloves in this video made me think of rabbits or doves conjured from a hat by a magician. The flapping and flopping of these gloves was just weird and perhaps nothing short of symbolic, perhaps, of how this crisis is being handled.

Another 2018 video I love is of three musicians hopping, sort of dancing, on a gigantic piano in an idyllic park. Stepping each on a number of keys, they played the Italian song "Volare" together. The sun had come out, and a wide ring of audience stood around. Pre-C, obviously.

To stay on the theme of singing, I try to phone at least one person every day. Pre-C, I think we forgot the luxuries of treating others to our voice. In the case of some elderly aunts, I sit down for a nice long talk, prepare a cup of coffee (but it can also be tea), make sure nonexistent work is finished and that I don't need to go to the bathroom. These elderly ladies were also housebound pre-C, during C, and presumably will be post-C as well. *Hello? Who? Oh, Jacqueline, how nice of you to phone! I am well. Just getting on with it, you know? Goodbye now, talk to you soon!*

Special thanks to TW Administrative Editor Susanna Baird for help gathering these responses.

Art Information

- "The Search for Empathy" and "City of Redemption" © [Darrell Urban Black](#) [5], one of the featured artists in TW Spring 2020; images used by permission only.

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