



Viral

Diary

Tim Ellis

Introduction

You can skip this bit if you're not interested. Most people do so you needn't feel obliged to read it.

Oh! Still here? Well OK then, but I'm only going to tell you about the background to the poems and why I wrote them. Here we go...

Viral Diaries came about due to NaPoWriMo which is a very bad acronym for National Poetry Writing Month, concocted by people who really ought to know better. It takes place in April every year and participants are required to write and post online one poem for every day of the month, responding to prompts posted daily on the NaPoWriMo website. I did this according to instructions once before in 2018 but I found the prompts not terribly helpful, so this year I decided to ignore them and instead I stuck loosely to a theme of the Coronavirus pandemic that was unfolding all around us, capturing my personal experience of lockdown and social distancing from day to day.

I ended up with 30 poems but it was obvious from the start that two of them were so bad they needed binning straightaway. I did want to remain with a nice round figure of 30 and luckily I had two poems written in March that fitted with the theme, so I have included those at the beginning. *The trees* is an analogy with the terrible Ash Dieback Disease epidemic which I have been meaning to write about for a couple of years while this disease consumes my local woodlands; and *Stone curlews* tells of the holiday myself and my partner Robbie unwisely undertook in February and early March to Mallorca, when we spent a whole fortnight on that island worrying about the long train and ferry journeys we would have to endure to get us home to Yorkshire through Spain and France, countries where the virus was already beginning to take hold.

The next six poems are all similar in tone and fairly straightforward accounts of life under lockdown. The first in the set - *Lockdown* - was crowd sourced on Facebook: I invited online friends to complete the sentence "When this is all over..." and then I made a poem out of their responses. My thanks are due to Cat Allen, Jem Henderson, Helen Shay, Frances-Mary Callan, Helen Pugh, and Robbie Burns for their contributions.

Following those there is a set of five short poems looking at the pandemic in a more allegorical way: *Street party* and *Clapping the carers* are about my neighbours; *Lunaria annua* and *Forget-me-nots* look at it through the medium of flowers; and *Owl box* is about, wel...owls!

Tim is the only poem that reacts directly to a current news story - not about myself as you might expect but lamenting the tragic death from Covid-19 of the popular comedian and former Goodie, Tim Brooke-Taylor. I return to a flower theme with *Daffodils*, this and the following poem being the only ones in the collection that make no direct mention of the pandemic nor lockdown and social distancing. *Fern Hill revisited* is also the only instant where I actually followed the

NaPoWriMo prompt, adapting the eponymous Dylan Thomas poem to my own circumstances. *Living in a crazy world* is a lyrical piece I am currently trying to set to music; and *April* is soon to be published in an anthology called "The Pandemic Poetry Anthology" edited by Manuel Nava Leal in Houston, Texas.

The next four poems are longer, but in a lighter vein and I am quite pleased with them all for this reason. Then *Tadpoles* returns to a nature analogy; *Running the Lakes* is a piece of light-hearted banter dedicated to a good friend of mine notorious for his boasts of long-distance cross country running; and *Allotmenting* and *Robin* both came to me whilst working on my allotment in the same weekend.

Beyond eternity I think may be the best of this collection, about minute-silences past and present; and *Our honoured guest* is an update on a hedgehog we once rescued from freezing winter weather on our doorstep, about whom I have previously poeticised (his name is Harvey!) The collection finishes aptly with *Hope for nature?*, my hopes and fears for what the post-pandemic future might bring us.

I hope you will enjoy reading these poems as much as I have enjoyed writing them, and if that is the case please tell your friends!

The trees

The trees have known for years.
Ever since we knotted up the sky
with filamentous nets of vapour trails
ribboning out from planes like silver tails,
they sensed these drifting tendrils signified
their time would end in tears.

Subterranean fibres
of mycorrhizal fungi spread the news,
whispering "Now the men are all connected,
one bug is all it needs and they've infected
our total globe!" This was a widespread view
with root and branch subscribers.

The elms were first to go:
Ascomycota struck, left not one standing.
Then oak and larch, and now the ash have die-back.
There's screaming in the woodlands at the climax
but no one hears: we shun the understanding
of trees who always know.

The virus jabs and injures
whilst blithe, derisive voices jibe "It's you
that dies and now the trees get retribution
for felonies of felling and pollution!"
They perish 'neath the sky's unblemished blue,
wagging scraggy fingers.

Stone curlews

We hear them in the night
wailing in the fields
voices with no bodies, all around the farm
responding to our plight.
Those plaintive cries appeal
to all our apprehensions, our feelings of alarm

and feeling of dislodgement
stranded where we are
amid the stubble fields on a cold flat plain,
begrudging our misjudgement.
Like many, we'd prefer
the slow journey home to life in this terrain.

From sundown through till dawn
the Stone Curlews whistle,
lamenting of a planet that's wretched for vaccine
with doleful calls that mourn
from dead stalks of thistles,
curlewing the suffering of Covid 19.

Lockdown

When this is all over
when this plague withdraws from my land
we might go back to caring
about crap like Love Island.

I shan't waste my breath
on blasphemies or cursin'.
When this is all over
I'll be a better person.*

When this is all over
our hair will be much longer
tied in plaits or knotted into dreadlocks.
We'll reacquaint with lovers
and let our love grow stronger
like time travelling refugees from Woodstock.

My calendar won't be this empty slate
but map the course of where I'll gadabout
on summer nights; the only filled-in dates
won't be the days we put the rubbish out.

When this is all over
I want a new tattoo,
sit in a park and have a beer,
go to the wrestling - front row view!
When this is all over
this is what I'll do:
I'm gonna hug all my friends
(perhaps some strangers too!)

When this is all over
I'll feel less disenchanting.
When this is all over
I'll not take being alive for granted!

*Helen Shay, rephrased!

Viral truth
Harrogate

Scarce a vehicle on the road
where once was nothing else.
The town deserted, eerily quiet,
the roadway's throbbing pulse
slowed to stroll of drifting clouds
and daffodils which dance
upon the Stray, a golden riot
across the green expanse.

The sky above a perfect blue
unscarred by aeroplanes.
No sirens wail in misery,
no rattling of trains
disturbs the mid-day quietude.
We hear the songs of birds
rising to a symphony:
language with no words.

Cyclists swish their sanctioned tracks
and runners plod and huff
the pavements lining Skipton Road,
haloed in sweat and puff.
Walkers dodge a dance of tricks
to stay six foot aloof,
step *pas de deux* and do-si-dos
and jig around the truth

that now the petrol party ends,
the diesel beat bleeds dry
as fifty years of rising norms
come crashing from the sky.
Festivities have ceased, my friends:
the age of oil has run
to falling stocks, financial storms
and ease for everyone.

Song of the isolationist

I am the isolationist
working all day, all alone.
Working solitary hours
'cause I cannot work from home.

I take the van out early morning,
garden tools comprise my load.
I drive on near-deserted highways,
the last white van on the road.

What has become of the traffic
that used to continue pell-mell?
The cars and trucks and fleets of vans
that made all mornings Hell?

A virus has halted its progress
a Covid has locked down the world
and everyone's bored, remaining indoors
where eddies of industry swirled.

I drive to a desolate farmhouse
deep in the heart of the dale.
Curlews will be my companions
while self-isolation prevails.

I labour all day in the garden
my customers stopping indoors.
I am the isolationist
speaking to no one at all.

The elements gather around me:
the mist, the wind and the cold.
I beat a retreat through unpeopled streets,
the last white van on the road.

My lover shall greet me each evening.
A peck on my cheek is applied
and before I complain about heartache and pain
says "At least you've ventured outside!"

And she's right:
at least I've ventured outside.

I am the isolationist,
the nation's last working man.
I work my wage, day after day,
me in my lonely white van.

Pandemic

How did we get to this place?
Just three months ago
we worried about the threat of snow
not for the future of the human race.

How did we get here so quick?
I blinked and the world blew away.
I've lost the doubts that dogged my days
now half the world is sick.

Do you remember Brexit?
The bush fires, or climate change?
The Syrian War, its refugees,
the plague of plastic in the seas.
Now everyone suddenly forgets it.
Don't you find that strange?

I float in unmapped space
paddling to purchase a hold
on turbulent skies
my route uncontrolled,
forever doomed to roam
a countryside I don't recognise.
How did we get to this place?
How will we ever get home?

Prayer

Once we're on the other side of this,
when we seize some respite from the fear,
we might unearth a world worth waiting for
a world removed some way from the abyss.

Now we know we needn't tax our lives
with endless scurryings from A to B
in pointless journeys repetitiously
fuming up the air, we might revive

the sense of what our bodies can achieve
when not considered leaden lumps of flesh
we must transport by road. Perhaps we'll blush
if seen in cars for journeys you'd conceive

we could have made as easily on foot
or on a bicycle? And now we've learnt
to limit our demand, will we revert
to lavish affectations? Can we put

a smidgin of this new-found strength to use,
creating more from less, enjoy the world
not leaving burning footprints on the wilds?
Are we ready to declare a truce

in mankind's age-old contretemps with nature?
Keep the fossil poisons in the ground,
unite as never before to grasp this grand
inception to a brighter, cleaner future?

Restitution

Dust in the morning sunlight
glittering like gold;
the chink in the curtains
an opening to the world.

You, my heart's delight
illuminated, boldly
moving through the swirling
interstellar wind.

What shall we do this morning
in our isolation?
Shorten a watch strap,
give my hair a trim?

Grout the wall with mortar
where creeping saturation
Inveigled the gaps?
Give the grass a strim?

The links of time, constricting,
consolidate our leisure
engendering a lasting
indemnity within.

I shrug off distractions
and lose myself to pleasure,
recall the morning's dusting
of gold upon your skin.

Street party

Yesterday the neighbours threw a party -
not an easy thing in isolation!

They sat out on the pavement drinking hearty
toasts, each house an independent nation.

We passed them when we went out for our walk
and sauntering back home an hour later
they sat there still, exchanging bawdy talk
in words so slurred we pined for a translator.

Declining though we were, we understood
the pressures that can threaten to explode
when all the inmates of a neighbourhood
must stay indoors. The effort to be good
is gruelling but if anybody could,
I trust the residents of Leyland Road.

Lunaria annua

There's Honesty now in the woodland.
I don't remember seeing it before.
The purple flowerheads march in profusion
onto the welcoming forest floor.

A buzzard's slow-flopping into its headwind
and a kestrel is seen off by a crow.
Chiffchaffs are pinking symphonic confusion
from the trough of the railway below.

Sun droplets dapple the litter of Autumn.
The air breathes Spring and morning dew.
My thoughts ride soaring on a kite's wing,
thoughts of newness, thoughts of you.

This Spring unfolds unique and awesome:
the distance that's become routine
now bonds us both, the love-link tightening.
Honesty blooms like I've never seen.

Owl box

This morning when we ventured near the barn
an owl, surprised, flapped briskly from the box
I'd fixed for owls to nest in, in a spot
that owls should like, receding in alarm
through misty fields in manifest agitation.
I viewed her swift departure as bad form:
I'd hoped our careful distance might disarm
a bird adept in social isolation.
They needn't fear contagious hazards when
they barely meet each other on this farm.
(The male bird roosts some distance from the hen.)
It's long wet winters form their private Hell
but if mistrust can keep our owls from harm
that's much desired. I wish her family well.

Clapping the carers

Last night when we clapped the NHS
I noticed, in-between the chimes and cheers
that many who displayed their thankfulness
were people that I hadn't seen for years.
Funny how this social isolation
brings us closer to our closest neighbours,
creates a more connected population,
passing round the love, exchanging favours.
Maybe what'll make a better future's
a lockdown crisis every year or two:
we'll keep on having meetings on computers
to organise the work someone must do
to lift the flat economy off the floor,
and meanwhile we'll find out who lives next door.

Forget-me-nots

All around the edges of my borders
grow tiny flowers whose jollity makes me cry.
Liberal-minded herbs resisting cordon,
their tone reflects the freedom of clear skies.
Cushioned up together, these soft droves
transpose my garden to a sea of blue.
Their seed-heads must get carried in my clothes,
'cause all my clients' gardens have them too.
In this grief of social isolation
I'm hoping every place I've been I may
by fortune have bequeathed some consolation,
disseminated tiny flowers to say
in language not dependent on translation,
"Forget me not although I'm far away."

Tim

Goodieeeeees!

Goodie-Goodie Yum Yum!

T B-T was someone,
the first to make me roar with laughter.
Special permission to stay up late
if I were good; they came on after
Parkinson at half past eight.

Slapstick magic, quite absurd!
Bill & Graeme, but Tim was best:
bowl of custard in his face,
Union Jack on his vest,
slightly camp and Pythonesque
before that was a word.

Caricature of the true-blue Tory,
dressing as a circus clown,
pompous Land of Hope and Glory,
giant Dougal knocks him down.

Front-rider on the trandem,
no comedian could evince
hilarity like that from random
silliness -
I've not had such hysterics since
great Kitten Kong did the business
with the monuments of London.

Goodie-Goodie Yum Yum!

Daffodils

When they start to droop they have to go.
A pinch, then twist and tug will do the job.
Toss them with the bucketed bits and bobs
you teased out from the Triumph Tulip row.
They're OK while they're bright and beautiful,
sunshine yellow, wonderful to see,
but knackered as they are and well-nigh co-
matose you deal with them. Not cute but dull,
they ought to know by now what to expect,
saddening the garden with their so-
ber faces and appearance of neglect.
So don't be squeamish, get on with dead-heading!
Next there's box to trim and lawns to mow.
The compost will be good for summer bedding.

Fern Hill revisited

Now as I was young, uneasy under the old oak boughs
Above the stilted shouts of parents who disagreed,
At night I felt a tingle, stirring.
Time let me fail at rhyme
Grasping at the sixth-form poetry prize,
And honoured among choirboys I was lead soprano. Oh happy sound!
And once below a time I chanced on Dylan Thomas
Stumbling crazed and rabid
Down the corridors of school.

And as I was green and crafty,
Famous for my poems
About the Scout campfire singing, and far from home,
I listened to Neil Young once only.
I'd time to play and be
Golden in Freddie Mercury dreams,
And green and golden I was front man and axeman and rhythm section all in one,
Windmilling chords like The Who my Marshall barked clear and cold.
And Black Sabbath rang slowly
In the Metal of their down-tuned strings.

Nothing I cared, in the Red Flag days, that time would take me
Down to Greenham Common to link hands
Round the doom laden missile silos.
Nor that riding to sleep
I should hear the Red Arrows fly to the Farnborough Air Show
And wake to the Broadmoor Siren's wildest sound.
Oh as I was young, uneasy in my merciless teens,
Time made me a Green, and striving
Though I sang in my shower like a banshee.

Livin' in a crazy world

I wake in the morning and I wash my hands
then I pack the box for my own packed lunch.
I wash my hands to the government standard,
wash my hands and I take the plunge
out into the crazy world.

Now I'm outside, I'm the Omega Man.
Here on the street it's quiet as death:
there's not a car, there's not a van.
When walkers pass I hold my breath,
can't share our air when we're livin' in a crazy world.

I'm standing with a shopping cart
waiting for "Go" at the local store,
all of us queued six feet apart
but nothing ever fazes me no more,
now I'm livin' in a crazy world.

I take supplies to my mother-in-law.
Its hard to talk, we need to shout.
She won't cross the threshold of her own front door,
no my mother-in-law's not coming out
into the crazy world.

I go to my work where I weed and mow,
place mulch round the plants so the plants will grow.
Water the turf so the grass stays green
while my clients ain't nowhere to be seen.
Not a word for me, not a cup of tea,
there's no sympathy
when you're working in the crazy world.

I'm home by five and I'm still alive
at the bitter end of a crazy day.
We cook the food we need to thrive,
my partner and I, resolved to survive:
we isolate, we quarantine away,
away from the crazy world.

April

Nothing but sunshine warming the air today,
nothing but wildflowers nodding their heads in the field.
Nothing but mirth where shadows of pine trees play:

ripples of shade on the close-cut lawn, revealed
by the breath of breeze upon the trees to attest
the truth of everything that's been concealed.

The chaffinch in the needles, on her nest
has no need of the hardships we endure
she has enough to last, the bird is blessed

with fortitude and seems to know a cure
for all this crippling sickness which besets us.
Speak to us, songbird, pipe a tune so pure

the sun will sing before its light forgets us,
and we'll rise laughing when the virus lets us.

Uncle Jim

Here's the extraordinary tale of my Uncle Jim:
when everyone was told to stay indoors
the lockdown just wasn't long enough for him.

He loved to keep his house impeccably prim
and lockdown allowed him so many extra chores,
it was an extraordinary time for Uncle Jim.

Scrubbing the kitchen surfaces down with Vim,
polishing up the spotless parquet floors.
Lockdown couldn't last long enough for him.

The bowl had to be disinfected beneath the rim
'cause he was the Patron Saint of the sanitary cause
and these were extraordinary times for Uncle Jim.

He washed all the curtains simply on a whim,
cleaned out the cupboards and hoovered inside the drawers
'cause lockdown just didn't last long enough for him.

Some isolationists find themselves out on a limb
but Jim only found himself down upon all fours
scrubbing the doorstep: extraordinary Uncle Jim!

No daily run required to keep himself slim:
he could rack up ten miles hoovering without pause.
That's the extraordinary thing about Uncle Jim:
the lockdown just wasn't long enough for him!

The Ballad of Captain Tom

In these grave times there's few events
we may take comfort from
but one has touched the nation's soul:
the tale of Captain Tom.

A Yorkshire lad whose destiny sent him
to serve in World War II
in India and in Burma
till the Japanese withdrew.

Little is known of the Captain's life
from then till the here and now
when virus holds the world in thrall
and everyone's locked down.

Although despondency was rife
he acted with aplomb:
he set himself a daunting task
to achieve, did Captain Tom.

99 years had taken a toll
and his pace was woefully slow
but he vowed to walk a hundred laps
of his garden, even so.

On walking frame he commenced to stroll
up and down the path
and his daughter set up a fundraising page.
At first it was just a laugh -

he set his sights within the realm
of possibilities
hoping to raise a thousand pounds
for the NHS Charities.

But everyone was overwhelmed
at the scale of what he did,
not stopping till he'd raised a whopping
20 million quid!

Back and forth the soldier yomped
and noting his resilience
the TV News got on his case
so thousands turned to millions.

The online page was utterly swamped:
in the money poured.
“Twenty million!” flashed onscreen
and still the total soared.

All the world gave out a cheer
as he walked his final lap
and a Guard of Honour lined the route
of the lion-hearted chap.

And when the media came to hear
what the captain had to say,
he said “The sun will shine on you again
and the clouds will go away.”
He said “The sun will shine on you again
and the clouds will go away.”

Queue like a Cuban

When I was a backpacking groover
I bummed for some weeks around Cuba.
The music was stirring,
the ladies alluring,
the Salsa was quite simply super!

I recollect one of their doings:
a singular method of queuing
that made all the queues
so easy to use
no problems were ever ensuing.

When buying a ticket, or when
you've need of an ATM
you'd let people know
with one word: "*Ultimo?*"
and someone would signal it's them.

There's no need to ask for their *nombre*,
just keep half an eye on this *hombre*
then step out of line.
You may sip rum and lime
at a cool streetside bar in *la sombra*.

And when it's your man being served
you can stroll to the front unperturbed
by the sense of chagrin
that attends pushing in
and the mood of *détente*'s undisturbed.

To further polite coexistence
a conundrum gathers insistence:
what we soon must do
is learn how to queue
maintaining a safe social distance.

So I thought, when we lift up our lockdown
we ought to adapt ourselves: knock down
an age-old tradition
and move to this system
in preference to queuing the block round.

Aside from curtailing confusion
you're sanctioned to stand in seclusion.
I reckon the day
is not far away
when all us Brits queue like the Cubans.

TV from another era

They sit together, stand in crowds,
shaking hands and laughing loud.
Everything is still allowed -
we're watching
TV from another era.

Interviewers go head to head,
celebrity bakers conjure bread
in crowded kitchens, no sense of dread -
we're watching
TV from another world.

"Our guest today in the studio..."
no pre-recorded videos
nor lousy webcam audio -
we're watching
TV from another time.

They're sharing the sofa, not an inch of legroom;
renovating cottages, small rooms and no headroom.
Why's that politician not talking from her bedroom?
We're watching
TV from another existence.

Tactile presenters shake hands and hug and kiss.
Strictly Come Dancers are cheek-to-cheek in bliss.
What preposterous fiction is this?
We're watching
TV from another planet.

Famous Spring

Never was there such a famous Spring
as this exuberant spell in Twenty-twenty.
Never did I hear such songbirds sing,
nor blossom pledge such promises of plenty.
Never did we see such perfect blue
in days when aircraft veiled the sky with vapour.
A purer light than this did not break through,
or did I not appreciate its flavour?
This month I dare not speak to lifelong friends
when decency insists we wear protection;
can't bear to seek sensation through my hands
when everything I touch might spread infection.
Never did I preconceive this task
of cherishing each day like it's my last.

Caverns of the sea

There's crisis in the caverns of the sea:
the plague has penetrated even there.
Mermaids are now using PPE:
masks to help them breathe;
nylon nets for hair.

They also have a need of plastic gloves
to limit contact of their fish-scale skin
with harmful influences from above
so virus won't infect
their dearest kith and kin.

Surgical gowns are highly in demand:
a filmy sheath of damp-proof plastic ripples
around the breasts of many a maid; withstands
the seep of any rogue
lactation from her nipples.

They understand the social contact ban:
old rules required that mermaids should keep hid,
not come within two meters of a man.
(But everybody knows
they very often did!)

Siren singers lounge upon the rocks
and lays of sorrow drift across the waves.
They're wailing for the sisters they have lost;
crying out for mothers
gasping for their lives.

The sea's become a dark domain of death.
The mermen's coughs boom out like sea lion barks
and Old King Neptune's fighting for his breath
on a bed of kelp
soothed by his Nurse Sharks.

Mermaids who are, frankly, not great thinkers
have long been challenged not to take the bait
and swallow all they find, hook, line and sinker,
but now their work's cut out
to shake the barbs of fate.

In times gone by, evading nets of trawlers
concerned them most: the ones with larger breasts
got tangled up but many of the smaller
mermaids slipped out through
the gaps within the mesh.

This crisis throws a very different challenge
or could I say, a new kettle of fish?
We should not fume when, as they try to manage
they don't always dispose
of things the way we'd wish.

Notorious in the past for losing purses,
today we also find upon the beach
the debris dropped by stressed-out mermaid nurses
finishing a shift
with waste-chute not in reach.

These face masks on the beach do not surprise us.
Blue plastic gloves lie tangled with the kelp
along the strand. Abandoned plastic visors
lie scabbed with barnacles
and colonised by whelks.

So when our carers cry out for equipment
we must not grieve for missing PPE;
we know who takes delivery of the shipments
and all of it's in use
in caverns of the sea.

Tadpoles

There's tadpoles in the pond today:
a writhing ball of amphibious action,
a herpetologist's wildest passion,
squirring some macabre ballet
beneath a meniscus muzzed with duckweed,
bustling on business in a flux of pondweed.

I never noted the bobbles of spawn
though spawn there must have been, concealed;
the orgy evaded me which conceived
these thousand tadpoles newly born,
the clustering kindred in the shallows,
each another's dark grey shadow.

Foolish masses, huddled together
blithely convivial, condemned by their carelessness
in revelry, of ranavirus
leaping from pond to pond, forever
gobbling frogs and toads in ravenous
random attacks, the essence of callousness.

Running the Lakes
(for Mark Connors)

Out this morning, 8am
and starting off in Kendal
we ran the length of Kirkstone:
that was elemental.

We jogged right around Coniston
and then moved on to Rydal,
Hawes, and Derwent by 8.15
which might sound suicidal...

but what you must appreciate's
that Kendal, Coniston, Hawes,
Derwent, Kirkstone and Rydal are names
of my local Roads, of course!

Allotmenting

At least they haven't banned allotments yet:
the powers-that-be have classed it "exercise"
so we still own the freedom of our plot

though all else of our birthright's been excised.
So there we journey, loaded up with seeds
through streets as empty as the turquoise skies.

Our soil waits eager, making plain her need
to nurture all we hand into her care,
promising to water, house and feed

the tiny germs of hope we bury there:
the 'tatoes we entomb along the pathside,
the parsnips, chard and leaks we drill elsewhere.

Our bamboo pyramids implore the dark side
of history to prolong the growing season,
for though our crops may come up on the sparse side

we cogitate on winter for good reason,
foreseeing how the shops may want for rations
and green shoots wither once the earth is freezing.

Allotments - they're lots more than idle fashion:
for many they're a source of life itself,
our living, and an overriding passion

that keeps the stuff of life upon our shelves.
These dust-seeds will be carrots on our plate!
This soil becomes our guarantor of wealth

and every humble seed we propagate's
a needed mouthful on a future date.

Robin

Minstrel in the hedge
and unapproachable
as any distant star
that twinkles in the sky;
something of the wild,
remote, untouchable,
untroubled by the wiles
of thieving crows nearby.

He sings until his heart
has broken and a stain
of lifeblood blots a rose
of scarlet on his breast:
a song of bitter tears,
of inconceivable pain,
a cloud around the hedge
that hosts his secret nest.

Come down now, Robin, come!
Sing gladly to my spade
that turns these clods of earth
and opens you a door
to where you cannot delve,
and where you see displayed
a panoply of worms
like seams of precious ore.

Preserve your comfort zone,
that distance of two metres
that's ever been your choice
with man, or make a dash
to snatch your treat, then flee
observing safe procedures
the way I do these days
if clients pay me cash.

Beyond eternity

Yesterday my phone reminded me
I must observe a minute's worth of silence
to honour those we've lost, and in compliance
I sat beneath a weeping willow tree,
no sounds but those of birds and bumble bees,
remembering all the workers who have died
attending to the needs of humankind.

Brave men and women I had never met,
who owed me no acknowledgment, and yet
had I been flattened by a grave disease
would seek to nurse me through the miseries
with fortitude I never should forget.

But deep abstraction made me think about
occasions in the 1970s
on Church Parade when I was in the Scouts
and forced to stifle sounds of boyish glee.
Despite "The Silence" quieting repartee
I'd be afflicted with an urge to shout,
and though I seized the opportunity
to conjure up the noise, and fear, and stench
endured by men who perished in the trenches,
I'd question what that had to do with me.

Now stooped in my reflective reverie
I ponder why, in that reverberant hall
one minute stretched beyond eternity,
but here beneath the grieving willow leaves
a dozen minutes pass like none at all.

Our honoured guest

Each evening as the far horizon frowns
the guest arrives and goes to our back garden
to eat a supper on the lawn: a spartan
meal of nuts and cereal endowed
with vitamins and protein. First he munches
all the food supplied, then tries to drain
our beverage: he drinks enough to drown
a lesser guest but we are not affronted -
we know him well: last winter, in our home,
in a black recycling box we'd locked him down,
and though he huffed about his right to roam
we kept him pinned. But now we welcome him
to dine with us and stay away from town
where cars and trucks imperil life and limb.

Hope for nature?

What hope for nature now?

For six whole weeks we've left it well alone.

The builders have gone home,
their diggers quiet while buds break on the bough.

But just two months ago

we worried atmospheric CO2

would scorch the world to toast

and yet it might - does anybody know?

We've relished clear blue skies

ever since the airlines shut up shop.

A question on our lips

is taking shape: "What need is there to fly?"

We've somehow got on fine:

we've shopped and gossiped, done our yoga classes,

emojied scarlet kisses

with cars inert. We've done it all online.

And nature's bouncing back!

Animals repopulate our towns

and birds sing brighter tunes

more liltingly, their phrasing more exact.

So maybe when we're free

we'll build a world that's better than before,

secure from forest fires,

with polar ice, with pure abundant seas.

Or will our fear expand?

Some blame bats and some blame pangolins -

perhaps! The bottom line:

behind all this is nature's unseen hand.

So maybe we'll recoil,

draw curtains on the sun and lock our doors,

scrub our hands for days

in morbid dread of sepsis from the soil.

If rules will not allow
a little girl to play out on the lawn
or weave a daisy chain -
what hope for her? What hope for nature now?