

The Grey Plateau

When the world stopped five years ago

Stephen Marche

IF AN EVENT IS UNSPEAKABLE, THE GENERAL rule is that people can't shut up about it. War, genocide, divine mystery, sexual taboo—all crowded subjects with libraries devoted to the hopeless inability of words to describe them. Covid is unspeakable another way. Nobody speaks about it.

No other catastrophe during my lifetime has generated such a stark contrast between the scope of its impact and the poverty of its discourse. There have been a few Covid books—a pseudo-comic novel here, an analysis of the epidemiology there—but they can't be said to amount to even a conversation. No memorials will be established, no testimonials gathered. Its anniversaries, like the fifth, around the time you're reading this, will be neither celebrated nor mourned.

Silence is typical in the aftermath of plague in every period. You can teach an entire course on First World War poets. Try finding a plague poet, even though the 1918–20 flu pandemic dissolved somewhere between twenty and fifty million souls. Shakespeare wrote about everything and everyone—kings and beggars, drunks and saints, hired killers and horny teenagers, couples who sleep together even though they hate each other, Black generals who defend white cities, misanthropes living in caves, eating roots, throwing away money—but he never once wrote about the plague, even though from 1606 to 1610, London's theatres were open for only about nine months between bouts of mass death. The basic reason for the silence is simple enough: Plague, unlike war, is an encounter with meaninglessness. Plague falls like a shadow, and a shadow can be articulated only against illumination.

Covid is a halfway impossible subject for another reason. It was a public catastrophe lived privately, a general crisis of intimacy crumbling, and each of us broke down on our own. A hint of what Covid was like: My wife and I don't like to have sex in the house when the children are in it, and the children never left the house, and it was not possible to rent a hotel room, so we would sit on the sofa, watching a show, and I would put my hand on my wife's thigh and just keep it there, at the threshold. That was Covid. Inconclusive intimacy mush. Everybody has a story like that. Covid is everybody having a story like that and nobody sharing it.

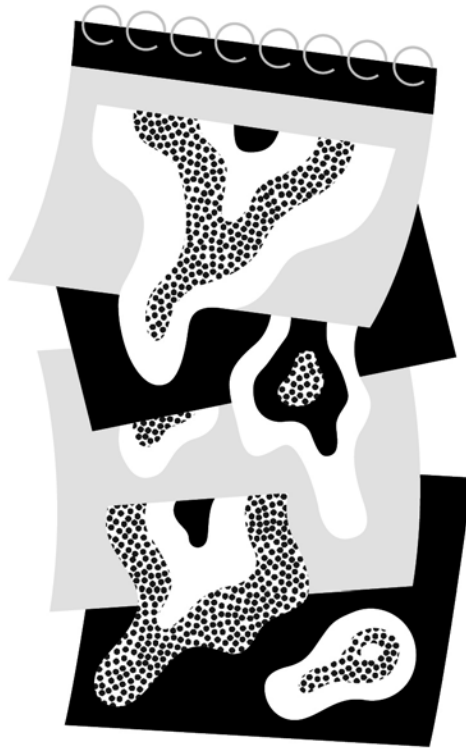
The political consequences of Covid have become glaring. The times that have followed Covid are broken, and nobody wants to remember the breakage.

For most of us, Covid was a private event, one of shared secrets tucked away, the occluded episode of my middle age. That connection, at least, was easy to grasp even at the time, halfway

to cliché. In the middle of life's way, I found myself on a grey plateau.

♦

THE INITIAL CRISIS OF THE PLAGUE'S ARRIVAL WAS brief, and I have only the vaguest memories of a variety of disaster movie scenes: cruise ships drifting on the ocean because no port would accept them, last planes leaving tiny islands. That March, a magazine editor I knew, married, with two children, received a message from an ex-girlfriend entering hospital, telling him that he had always been the love of her life. She wanted him to know, since she assumed she was dying. But the panic was brief, a lingering aftertaste on the subsequent emptiness. The onset of



The pandemic altered the very nature of time.

Covid was the last burst of meaning before the meaninglessness set in.

Toronto, where Covid found me, endured some of the longest lockdowns in human history, longer than Venice or Cairo during the bubonic plague. The state of emergency lasted 777 days. Yet that duration is meaningless to me.

After the panic ebbed—death present, finances decimated, assignments cancelled, children's schools upended—the first impression of the disease, and the most fundamental, was that time lost its distinctions. To this day, my memory of any external event during that period—a traffic accident or a new song or a graduation—lacks position. Did that happen in 2022 or 2021 or 2020, and in what order?

I know I wasn't alone in losing track. For years after Covid, friends and I would sit around trying to gauge the dates of things and fail. It was like a stretch of highway with no signs or turn-offs. Just road and more road.

The unique sensuality of Covid was bound up in the altered nature of time. It is that distinct sensuality, more than any idea or event, that I wish to capture, to remember, to hold in my hand like a stone.

I cannot remember 777 days, but I remember 6:03. I remember "3rror." For the whole of Covid, the Soldiers' Tower clock overlooking Hart House Circle at the University of Toronto stopped at 6:03. And some kid was spray-painting "3rror" over the walls downtown. Every time was 6:03. Every message was 3rror.

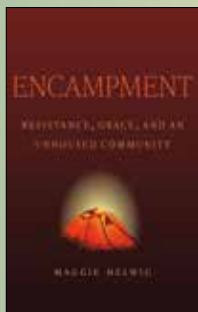
You had no choice but to take stock of where you were. I found myself somewhere around forty-four years old and capable of surviving some turbulence. My daughter was eight, a mischievous faerie of glee, and my son fourteen, a yeti of an emerging man who skulked down the stairs to argue with me about old Polish movies and the latest bands out of the Midwest. They knew they were loved, which when you get right down to it is all you can really provide. My wife treated the warts on my left foot by rubbing apple cider vinegar on them, and they shrank, dissolved. It was as good a place as any for us to start losing our minds.

Meanwhile, my father-in-law, Bob, a man I loved, was deteriorating into vascular dementia. The tide of blood to thought in his brain was slowing. He was eighty-eight and lucky as hell to have lived anywhere near that long, having smoked too much, drunk too much, eaten whatever was put in front of him. He was moving onto the grey plateau in himself as the world turned into grey plateau.

In the morning, I would wander through Toronto's emptiness, which was at least novel. I remember a creeping guilt when I spat on the ground in those early days. At first, nobody knew the vector of the disease. Was I killing someone with my spit? If I passed another pedestrian on the sidewalk, I would go into the street rather than walk by. "Now is the time, if ever there was one, for us to care selflessly about one another," said the doctor whom everyone ignored.

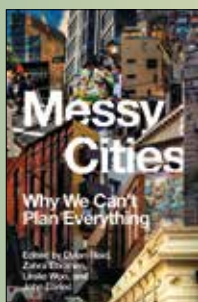
The city bewildered itself with dazzling speed. Within a few weeks of the first lockdown, foxes were spotted near the Mies van der Rohe skyscrapers of the financial district. A peregrine, curving like an ache, nested in the high windows of the stadium where no one would be playing baseball. The incomplete condos loomed like stranded alien ships docked on the lakeshore.

Fresh releases from Coach House Books Spring 2025



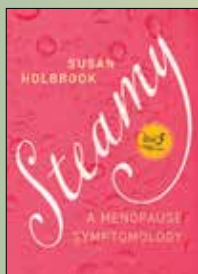
Encampment: Resistance, Grace, and an Unhoused Community by Maggie Helwig

An activist priest provides sanctuary for an encampment of unhoused people in her churchyard. (May)



Messy Cities: Why We Can't Plan Everything Eds. Dylan Reid, Zahra Ebrahim, Leslie Woo, and John Lorinc

Would our cities be more lively, more liveable, if we broke the rules more often? (June)



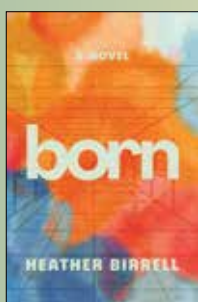
Steamy: A Menopause Symptomology by Susan Holbrook

Hot (flash) takes, symptom by symptom, of The Change: Steamy is a raucous menopause memoir. (April)



Horsefly by Mireille Gagné, tr. Pablo Strauss

A chilling tale about the ways in which we try to dominate nature, and how nature will, inevitably, wreak retribution upon us. (May)



Born by Heather Birrell

What happens when an English teacher goes into labour during a Toronto high school lockdown? (June)



Enjoy Your Stay at the Shamrock Motel by Andrew Kaufman

Aesop meets Anaïs Nin in these sexy and absurdist stories of very unexpected redemption. (June)

I could not get it through my skull that there would be no sports, kept looking to the online schedule.

The bewildered city at 6:03 in 3rroor.

◆
WITHIN WEEKS, THE COYOTES MOVED IN OFF THE ravines, through the parkettes, down the rail corridors, pushers of periphery, patient in their unscrupulous pride. My kids ran to see them at the window as they strolled by on floating cunning feet. You could tell them apart instantly from the dogs, not by their shape but by their movement, their manner. Dogs wander and meander, sniffing, playing, limping, dragging themselves around. Coyotes walk straight down the middle of the road. They go where they are going.

◆
THE UNSPEAKABLE IS PRETTY BASIC ON THE INSIDE: there's nothing to speak about. Covid removed the distractions. The pointlessness of the city was glaring, the pointlessness of all our petty ambitions.

In a basket under the kitchen table lurked the spring culture preview section of the *New York Times*, from February 2020. It must have been more than sixty pages, with every column inch promising dozens of shows and concerts — all cancelled, all the thousands of careers leading to those moments cancelled, after decades of struggle and consideration, snuffed out, shipwrecked.

The past went missing as the future did. The past occurs as a reminder: the coleslaw at the jerk chicken place conjures up a pineapple you once ate in Malaysia, the queen moved on a chessboard on the street brings up making out to Freddie Mercury tunes, the carnation in a lapel looks like the sound of the Four Tops your uncle played in his Pontiac. All such occurrences had been voided.

What do we build time out of? We make it out of who-fucked-who and what's-the-latest and who-won-and-who-lost and war and the pursuit of nirvana and the latest restaurants and numbers flowing between screens and who's-in-who's-out and resign-minister-resign and I-should-be-happier and what's-wrong-with-them and where-would-I-publish-this-piece and people-ought-to-know. Covid was an experiment. What happens when the objects of attachment are removed? If the grand illumination turned out to be the grey plateau? If enlightenment is just too boring to be endured?

Covid's sensuality gushed from the repression of the broken time. I would have deep cravings to look at a painting, to hear a violin. Everything continued through dampened inertia. Pleasure was out of whack.

The same dampening registered in the eyes of the children, in their rooms. We told them we would survive, and they believed it because we believed it. They also saw what we could not answer; they saw it all too well. The kids, during those early days, met with no other kids. As the crumpling of their isolation could no longer be ignored, the compensation we concocted, laughably, was online therapy.

My wife and I accepted that we were living in a bracketed time; that's how we survived. The truth was that Covid was a time without brackets. If you have enough to do, you can avoid looking at life. "I have this piece to write." "I'll deal with that after this job is over." "When I have enough money, I can start to look into it." All those brackets fell away. Life was the

possibility of death and the difficulty of love. No distractions. Love and death on the grey plateau.

Time no longer closed or opened.

One night, Bob stumbled up, startled from his bed like the ghost he would be, and took a fall. The diagnosis was a compression fracture, the crack-up coming quickly and carelessly. Hydromorphone shrouded him in the cloud of unknowing, which he shook off only momentarily, in fits of miscomprehension, realizing that he was misunderstanding, then slipping below.

Those nights, as the plague drifted into spring, I sat at my plywood desk and stared out at nothing in particular. My neighbour's roofers had done a sloppy job. The heads of the nails were exposed. The ordinary course of my anxious ambition — a fluttering hummingbird at the back of my throat — gave way to a low chord of dread. Maybe all the anxiety and ambition were to cover up the dread.

The term "doomscrolling" was so accurate. The information on disease clusters and viral loads poured through the screens. It was a waterfall of emptiness pouring in great buckets down the scalp.

My writing assignments had all evaporated, as had the money. I was supposed to be at the Iowa State Fair, in London for the Queen's Jubilee, in Madagascar. I could write. I did write. What else was I going to do? It's not like I could go get myself a day job. But I was not writing for anyone or for anything. It was like writing at fourteen, scribbling into notebooks like jerking off, the ink on the page as pointless as cum on a pillow.

Still, the day I learned the correct word for insect shit, nothing could have made me unhappy. I walked around like a kid at camp. The word for insect shit is "frass."

In the evenings, I writhed, flummoxed by the non-memories from all the lives I might have lived. Ethereal labyrinths. Flouted ambitions fell on me like invisible nets.

Every morning, I woke as late as possible, and I wrote until I didn't feel like I had to write anymore; then I went birdwatching. This is probably how I am supposed to live, in or out of plague.

I remember, over a field by a road in a town an hour away, in the dust and the snow, a flock of bluebirds, cataracts of iridescence, their blue like pop-rocked ganache, like fluttering pinpoints, glitches, their rust breasts like embers, fuming brandy. The power of a new sight during Covid could be overwhelming, weep-inducing. The bluebirds wheeled and caroused, wavering, then passed through the pine screen.

To see something new, during Covid, was to be impregnated by the vision.

The definition of privilege was absolutely clear to me during Covid: it was access to an outdoor space. My wife and I were privileged. We had a pocket backyard. The dripping slime and sponge of a Canadian April is not outdoor weather, not in any other time, any other crisis. But I wanted to be near earth. At the big window beside the trellis, I could see my family, the three of them, in the indoor coziness, my loved ones, laughing, squabbling over a leftover bit of cake. Outside that ring of love, I sat inhaling the vapour of dark thaw. I leaned down to touch crumbly mud, sap, and reek.

The bonds of love. That is the exact phrase: The bonds. The attachments. The ties. The links. The joinings. The fastenings. The securings. The solderings. Love felt like that. Love, standing in each other, inescapable to each other.



COACH
HOUSE
BOOKS

Caught like a mouse in a glue trap, the more I writhed, the more I stuck. The more stuck, the more writhing. I told myself that the disease was the trap, the breakdown of the global order was the trap, the closed border was the trap. Love was the trap, the fixation.

The city's sudden emptiness was a reflection of my own. The furious busyness ceased, the family, the career, the dreams. The future turned out to be a distraction, the Big Distraction. And what was I? Who was anybody?

In the evening, I walked alone, first up, past the lousy fake castle in town, then down, inside a ragged crevice between the brown brick condo in an imitation Bauhaus style and the Tweedsmuir streetcar stop, under and through the strip of leftover nature, the ghost of primeval forest, the city's inverted crown of its ravines.

In the ravines, the trees cracked the early evening, black webbings on a sooty orange sky, screening the backs of the wealthier houses. I paced all the way up, under the arched overpasses, where the graffiti grew angrier, 3rror after 3rror after 3rror, and the urban flotsam accumulated—a child's lost glove propped on a post, a tossed lighter among crushed PBR cans, a withered silver balloon stuck in the unreachable branches of a complicated tree—and then, like a sigh in a silent crowd, the path opened onto the strange remnants of a cricket field.

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THE CITY WAS A PREMONITORY DARKNESS, AND AS I stepped into the light over that field, a coyote strolled past me. The stranger I recognized as my own.

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DURING COVID, AIR AND WATER QUALITY improved. Fish returned to the coral reefs. Sea turtles resumed nesting on the beaches stolen from them. Ecologists called it the "anthropause." The earth healed as we crumpled.

During the long nights of the plague, my son and I watched movies, one each evening after dinner. We would do little festivals—one week noir, another week '70s horror, samurai films, that sort of thing. The week we watched all the *Sharknado* movies, in order, was one of the most delicious weeks of my life.

The *Sharknado* franchise turns the premise of the shark movie genre into a ludicrous game of one-upmanship. It's not just a shark; it's a shark tornado. It's not just a shark tornado; it's a shark tornado in space. In *Sharknado 3: Oh Hell No!* (such a great subtitle), a space shark swallows the pregnant Tara Reid and then falls to earth, burning up in the atmosphere, while Tara Reid gives birth inside the shark, so that once the shark smashes into the earth and the hero cuts open the corpse, a baby's hand pokes through the hole. It's fantastic. The sequels elaborate the absurdity, until eventually there are time-travelling sharknado hunters in a campy version of Camelot.

How we laughed, my son and I, at the poor colour correction, the stock footage, the lousy dialogue, the humiliating conclusion to the careers of once prominent actors. But I admired the *Sharknado* makers for how absolute they were willing to be in pursuit of a vision of death rendered absurd.

I would also hazard, as a guess, that I saw *Jaws* twenty times over the course of the pandemic. The politics of *Jaws* is identical to the politics of Covid. A mysterious force approaches the

citizenry invisibly. It kills without discrimination. The killing produces panic. The scientific response demands economic restraint. The economic forces restrain the scientific response. The mayor of Amity and the president of the United States try to spin nature: "Amity, as you know, means friendship" and "We have it under control." An old lesson: there is no cure for being too stupid to take the medicine.

The horror is the fantasy: shark movies promise that the monsters of this world are confrontable. The fear we hunger for is the fear we understand. We'll take it any way we can.

Death requires iconography: a set of teeth, a door looking onto the sea, a pale rider, a game of chess. Covid had no iconography, no language. Death hovered in the air around others, invisible mist, not there and everywhere.

Propped up in his hospital bed, set up in his office, Bob looked like a man on a boat lost at sea or like he was being ferried across a river. That's the ancient metaphor, isn't it? A ferryman was carrying him across the waters, across the river of forgetfulness, the river of death by which all oaths are sworn and all debts forgiven. His wedding ring would be payment, shedding love for the crossing.

During Covid, the ordinary processes of dying were suspended. "It was his time." That's how we once described a good death, a death that meant what it was supposed to mean. During Covid, you couldn't tell whose time it was and whose time it wasn't.

"Covid meant staying, but love is not a staying, most of the time."

I keep a pile of stones in my office, each from some place I have visited, perhaps two dozen or so, from deserts and jungles and ruins and beaches. I prefer them to souvenirs. Amulets against regret, you might call them. During Covid, I could see they were just a pile of stones.

To live fully is no answer to the emptiness. On the grey plateau, memories and regrets stand equally drained.

The world was happening, and you could not see it. If you could not go and see it, did it matter that the world was happening? The snow was curling lazily, in widening circles, over a decrepit synagogue down a back alley; the bamboo was startling out of the enigmatic forest in bombastic cracks; callaloo stewed in its broad-leaf thyme by the clearing in the mountains; the river kept flowing like a longing god to the Arctic. To what end? "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air." What if that flower is everything, the universe? A song to nobody, nowhere.

Covid was the experience of no experience, the meaning of the world slackening, then falling from the shoulders.

There were no departures and no arrivals. Absence was absent.

Death is supposed to be a social occasion. We learned this, if nothing else, during the pandemic. The old people fading into opiated oblivion with the flickering of the iPads on their laps were open wounds, sepsis of the spirit. Another ancient lesson: the world becomes haunted when the dead haven't died properly.

Love during Covid was different, too. Love, as we know it, or rather as we read about it, the love from the songs and cards and shows, throwing shards of mirror in the air, glances and imprecations and half-flashes, vanished. The ground cracked with broken glass instead.

Covid meant staying, but love is not a staying, most of the time. Love is a falling out and a falling back. Your wife can fall out of love with you pouring coffee and back in love with you by the first sip. The same is true for the children. They must leave and return to know that you are home. They must escape you to meet you.

French farce had it right: love is a bunch of doors opening and closing on glamorous hinges. The hinge of thighs, the hinge of passport control, the hinge of history. During Covid, all the doors closed, the hinges rusted. The sentimental, the erotic, the caring, the dutiful, they were all smashed together, and it was grotesque and delicious, abject and phenomenal.

The rootedness that saved us was the torment that destroyed us.

It was no surprise, to anyone, that the first thing everybody did when restrictions lifted was get divorced. We had all taken a good long look at love while we had been looking away from death.

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BY THE SUMMER, IN THE EVENING, BETWEEN LIGHT and dark in the ravines, the coyotes would stroll by me, and I mean the coyotes passed so close to me I could have reached out and smoothed their fur. They drifted in with their drifters' ways—eyes low, curious but unhurried, intentional but open, clear in the wilderness of themselves. It seemed natural for them to walk by me. Never a whiff of fear passed through me. The city was theirs, and the coyotes and I knew it. I could not be their prey. I could not be their enemy. We were companions on the grey plateau.

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MY SON REMEMBERS THE COVID YEARS AS SOME OF the best in his life. I don't disagree. Expectations and ambitions had been removed—those follies that human beings construct in order to forget that it's just them and the people they love, when you get right down to it.

My daughter braiding my hair, which I could not get cut—that might take an afternoon. The tingle of her little fingers in my roots. In the place of ambition, love, the mess of love, taking care of people. That's what my wife and I shared. You cut pieces of yourself off and bury them, and they grow or don't grow, or grow and wither, and then you are in a garden, the rot and the damp, the flowers and the shade. There's less of you, but the world doesn't need more of you. People love you because you're useful. So be useful.

There is a distinct nostalgia for Covid among some of the people who lived through it. Life was a problem only when you thought about it.

In the dead of winter, we drove out to Scarborough, to a frozen marsh, pond after pond stretching off in a reedy glacial labyrinth. The neighbourhood boys had brought down sheets of plywood that they used to shovel off little rinks and paths between rinks. With my daughter, I skated across the bubbly rough ice, pond after pond, kilometre after kilometre, as if skates were a means of transportation. There was a kind of desperate trick you played on yourself: This is experience. I am now having an experience.

Humans need experiences as much as any other bodily need. That doesn't mean there's any value to them.

By then we were letting the children see friends, with masks on, outside. The isolation was not possible to endure. My son would go on crazy long walks with his friends. One day he logged forty kilometres. My daughter hung out on the porch. We bought a mat for her, and the neighbourhood girls came to play. They set it up like a bedroom, outdoors. They would watch shows on the iPad, in sleeping bags.

Just being together is enough: that's the lesson.

How will this lesson shape them? Unknown. Unknowable. Their intimate lives have been collectively altered, but to what end, or even in which direction, is ungraspable.

Everyone must come to the grey plateau. Everyone must wander it for a time. For some, a flash of terror. For others, an excruciating slide. It is not pain. It is not joy. The grey plateau is not hell. Hell has a purpose; hell fascinates. The grey plateau is not purgatory, not even limbo. In purgatory, you're moving up. In limbo, you're not moving. On the grey plateau, you are moving but not up, not down; you are moving forward, to more grey plateau, moving to no purpose, driven but away. It doesn't matter who you are. No one can be ready. No one can be ready for a world in which all there is to you is you.

Prometheus, chained to his rock, maybe dreamed of the fire he had gifted the species, but, I promise you, he spent most of his time chatting about banalities with the eagle who picked at his liver.

My wife bought a firepit for our backyard. You know what I discovered is never boring? A fire. In February, even, I would sit around the small fire in my backyard and try to figure out why fire never bores. Licks of blue around eggish coals. Nightmare haloes over seething embers. Sultry illicit hairs, the warmth on an eerie green. Comfort and danger. It must have had something to do with the comfort and the danger.

We gathered with friends and families, at a distance, masked, for the various rituals. Christmas in sleet, under umbrellas with aunts, uncles, nephews, cousins, eating lasagna with mushrooms and pine nuts. I baked almond cakes every weekend, because the recipe could be doubled, so we could keep one and give one away. People still mention those cakes I baked.

The truth is that I barely remember my wife during Covid. It's like asking what you remember about your throat. You know that you spoke and you ate, that you swallowed and that you coughed, that you breathed in and breathed out. We were functions of each other.

I KNOW THIS STORY IS EMBARRASSING, BUT I'M going to tell it anyway. When I was fifteen and growing up in Edmonton, a band of Cree started a program to bring random white suburban teenagers like me from local schools into their ceremonial life, and they brought me to a sweat lodge. I suppose the phrase for the sensation of the sweat lodge would be "agony," though it wasn't exactly suffering so much as my nervous system freaking. In the stinging mist of the sweltering, the rocks cracking red, the aerosol odour of the air burning, growling angrily, I approached passing out, and there and then I had a vision. I can see it now exactly as I saw

it in the dark pain: a coyote, pacing toward me, looking up, pacing away.

This vision has stayed my whole life.

It had no meaning until Covid.

I was living how I am supposed to live, and it was unbearable.

THEN THE VACCINE. THE FIRST STAGE OF THE plague lasted from January or February 2020 to November or December 2020, depending on when you heard the news of the disease and when you heard the news of the vaccine. The recovery from Covid went on much longer. The first part was suspension: What is happening? The second part was confusion: What are we moving into? From the cloud of death to the cloud of unknowing.

That is still the movement we are in.

The first vaccination went to an old lady in England. Her name I can't remember. The second dose went to an old man named William Shakespeare, and I remember obsessing over the fact that somewhere in England, some father, some mother, between eighty and ninety years ago, had made the conscious decision, of their own will, to bequeath their infant child the name William Shakespeare. Hope cracks ludicrously, to let the stupid light in.

At the time, the idea that anybody would resist a vaccine was also ludicrous, beyond credibility. But in hindsight, resistance was an almost organic reaction. What better way to pretend the plague never happened? Shoving

"The problem with forgetting yourself is that then you're reminded."

the meaninglessness down under the cover of meaninglessness. The grey plateau was all a fiction. We never came to it. The anti-vax movement was a demand of the broken, and their various protests were manifestations of that brokenness: Don't make me remember. Don't put me back in that emptiness.

During Covid, the connection between politics and hygiene was direct. How you washed your hands, how you covered your face was your politics.

A scandal arrived in Toronto that spring: young people filled Trinity Bellwoods Park, turning it into one elaborate, continuous picnic. The moralism, from authorities and journalists, was as absolute as it was ridiculous. You cannot stop young people from fucking in the springtime in Canada. Nobody ever has. Nobody ever will. The life impulse does not care about your philosophy or your restrictions or your warnings of death.

At the same time, it was impossible not to judge. Everybody who was more uptight than you was crazy and snobby. Everybody who was more relaxed was dirty and careless.

Friends in Wyoming had to drive to Colorado to shop for groceries because if they wore masks close to home, they were attacked in the store.

When the Freedom Convoy came to my neighbourhood, much later, the first word that crossed my mind was "unkempt." The rebels were stubbled, ragged, people with chaos hanging from the fringes.

The convoy blazoned the word "freedom" just as it lost all sense. They shouted it so that

its meaninglessness could be delayed for a bit. Whatever did they mean by freedom during a plague? Free from what? Free from those you love? Free from my cloudy-eyed son and my bright-hearted daughter? Free like who? Free like the man on the motorcycle who throws away his watch? Free like the runaway under the bridge? Free like the deer smashed to scarlet ribbons by the side of the road? If freedom isn't that, then what is it? Driving slightly faster than you're driving now? Is it reaching the moon, and after the moon, Mars? Is freedom just a higher limit on your credit card? Is freedom just what you could have been rather than what you turned out to be?

All the politicians who worked Covid and its aftermath are currently being voted out, all over the world. That is no judgment on their policies. One of the reasons we invented politicians is to have somebody to blame for reality.

I don't second-guess policy makers; I've met too many. Decisions are made in time, under conditions of imperfect information, by people who have got themselves into a situation they didn't understand when they began and who are, like everybody else, mostly trying to get through the day. The various approaches by various scientists—to register excess mortality, to register learning outcomes, and so on—are of zero interest to me. There is no way to register the grey plateau. The politicians' ignorance was the general ignorance, the ineluctable ignorance. They didn't properly understand the cost of filling everybody away in little folders. They could not understand or face or articulate the humanity of the situation. How many years of old men's snotty lives are worth what quantity of brokenness in grade schoolers' eyes? No authority exists to render such judgments.

The first dinner with friends after lockdown, after over a year, was one of the great dinners of my life. There was no small talk. Nobody had anything small to talk about. No real estate transactions. No renovations. No teams. We talked about God and cosmic loneliness, about our experiences with nature, about fear and emptiness. Our children. We talked about love and death.

We talked about what age was the worst age to be during Covid. Another way to ask the question: What are the best years to be alive? We were middle-aged. It was obviously not us. I pitied the first-year university students, missing out on all the casual sex. Parents with kids in junior kindergarten—that seemed impossible to me. I do not know how they survived.

In each other's presences, the children wore the evidence of absence most openly. I'm talking about everybody's children. In the initial recovery, schoolboys fought at their baseball games. They spat on one another at assemblies. The girls couldn't look one another in the eye. You could see, through the scaffolding, elements of foundation had been unfilled. There's a great deal of talk about the education deficit—a 36 percent drop in reading ability and an 18 percent drop in numeracy in American grade schools—but those are ciphers. The children, like the rest of us, carried the grey plateau inside them.

I realized one morning that I had taken every shit for a year on the same toilet. I had been shitting the same shit for a year.

Ordinary life creaked back on rusty hinges. The first meal my wife and I ate at a restaurant—I can still recall the awkwardness of the

encounter. It was a fancy inn in the country. The whole ritual seemed so bizarre. You paid a man to bring you food from a kitchen, and if he pleased you, if he performed servility well enough, partly by hiding his servility so that you were not discomfited, you rewarded the performance on a sliding scale of a percentage of the cost of the dinner. The intention of dominance was so crude, but the elaboration of the custom was so elaborate. The purpose of sophistication is to obscure the reason for the act.

The final lockdown lifted like a busted curtain lifting at the end of a magic trick. Is it? What's that? Oh, wait. Ta-da! The city again. The shaken dragon dancers drummed themselves into a noodle house and then another noodle house and then a computer repair shop. A man posed in the sun, with green checkered hair to match his green checkered suit. Burnt meat, diesel, tattooed décolletage, bristling orange vomit, children crouched over a squashed caterpillar, greasy cash. Once again, I could forget myself.

The problem with forgetting yourself is that then you're reminded.

Bob, facing death, tangled in love, had something to say to me that he could not say. He started appearing to me first in dreams at the beginning of the second lockdown. Of all the species of ghosts the world has known — laurelled ancients in dark woods, misleading bog lights, windy screams, white shadows moving through walls, disembodied mangled voices, icons of our half-articulatory to each other across the uncrossable boundaries — mine was Bob. I would find myself in some busy place, outside the departures gate at the airport or on a rush-hour downtown street, and Bob would be turned to me shouting, but I couldn't hear. I couldn't make out what he meant.

I dreamed the ghost of a man before he died. That was Covid.

The second lockdown was worse. The grim shovelled walks of our lives. Wars. Attempted coups. Crumbling towers. The usual afflictions. All we could do was to keep love from drowning in the oceanic garbage of history.

That summer, toxic smoke from the world on fire roused the city, the Canadian forests burning more carbon than we'd been able to reduce over the previous decade. A background hum of despair infiltrated the streets.

You grow blasé about catastrophes after a while. The early ones, when history was returning, 2008 or so, were shocking. They felt unfair. The betrayal and greed of the previous generation stung. But soon enough you realize this is just the shit people have to go through. Dodge and weave like the rest.

◆
MY PANDEMIC WAS OVER WHEN I LOOKED DOWN from the window of my bedroom at a coyote's mangled corpse busted open on Dupont Street. It was a sign, every bit as much as the vision in the sweat lodge. Cars were moving along the spiderweb roads again, but city services had not recovered, so the coyote's corpse lay there, shredded and oozing, flattening day by day, the red-yellow of its guts grinding into the brown-red of its fur. After several weeks, it was little more than a smear. I didn't notice who finally came to clean up the mess.

◆
THE TIME OF THE ENDLESS DOG SHOW RETURNED, breeding and ass sniffing and the leash. You can still spot, in some untended alleys of this city, the

error tag. The clocks are 6:03 twice a day. There are other, odder remnants. On a flight I took just last week, they handed out wet wipes to everyone who boarded. I still don't walk beside another person on the sidewalk. Because of Covid, I learned the source of the sense of flummoxed ambition that never leaves me and that I had, until then, failed to see: you don't bring a coyote to a dog show. The grey plateau's gift to me.

My son tells me that I have a tendency to blame Covid for everything, that I overdramatize its effect, and I can understand his exasperation. My trend-piece mind has ascribed to Covid pop stars wearing baggier clothes, birdwatching and chess going mainstream, the sudden ubiquity of inbred hypoallergenic dogs, the replacement of coffee shops with weed spots. I might even be right, in some cases. The global economy, with its fractured logistical chains, nonsensical housing prices, and dreary, unsettling inflation, is frantic but hobbling, like a man running as fast as he can in a cast. Covid must be, in part, a cause for the xenophobia that has afflicted the world. The borders are closing. The walls are rising. The hatreds are swelling. A grand brutality has arrived. But how or why the brutality has emerged from Covid is vague at best, and the silence it inspires spreads and deepens the vagueness. The wars that have followed are some of the stupidest ever fought. I saw them described recently, in *Foreign Policy*, as "mourning wars," desperate attempts to fight against inevitable social and demographic decline. The despair of Covid was certainly provocative. Putin wanted to cosplay the Second World War so badly that he was willing to be the Germans this time. War gets Netanyahu through the day. They're fighting

wars for their own sake. As long as they're at war, they're meaningful. Without war, they would have to return to the grey plateau.

I can also understand the contention that Covid didn't change anything. A friend in tech described it to me as "the acceleration of the thesis," by which he meant the screening of the world pushed forward. Covid was a catalyst to the connected isolation that we had been driving at for decades. Whether the virus came from an accident at a wet market or a mistake at a lab hardly matters; the network was the culprit, the easy flow of money and people, Wuhan to Bologna, Bologna to Toronto, Toronto to Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Lumpur to Kingston, Kingston to Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires to New York. The sophistication was the befuddlement. The prosperity was the crisis. Their sources were the same anyway.

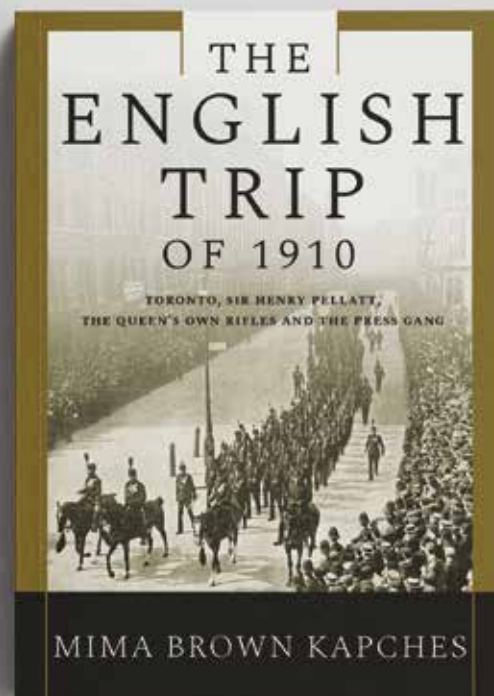
Covid had a tendency to exacerbate established tendencies in private life, too. A friend who drank ended up in need of a liver replacement. A friend who gambled lost his house. People can't talk about the plague because nobody is the hero of their own story during one. The unspeakability of Covid is simply the basic unendurability of the human condition considered in stillness: surrounded by death, bound by love, caught up in the fundamentally futile mechanism called time. No one wants to see it for what it is. Anything other will do.

Covid's ultimate lesson was so obvious it barely qualified as knowledge. Shit happens. All we have is each other, until we don't. The rest is pretending.

The best part of me is still out with the coyotes, in the cold, in the cracks. ▲

"An energetically readable history of a Canadian regiment's working vacation."

—Kirkus Reviews



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