



UNIVERSITY
OF ALBERTA

THE PANDEMIC

AND ME

A collection of short stories from real people



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The Pandemic and Me

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Dedication

Urbi et Orbi

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Preface

The coronavirus sprang us a surprise when it manifested in the twilight of 2019, bringing in its wake the COVID-19 disease, which soon spiralled into a pandemic. More than two years later, the unwelcome visitor is still with us, mutating into different variants.

The compilation of this chapbook is one of the two projects I am undertaking as a Writer-in-Residence (2021-2022) in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. The other is the curation of a recital of poems of African Masters by contemporary African poets on February 3, 2022, to mark Black History Month.

We received quite a number of submissions for this project, but being a

chapbook, we could not accommodate all the entries. The stories that appear here are a cross-section of narratives depicting the many faces of the COVID-19 pandemic in our community. This chapbook seeks to capture this zeitgeist for posterity, to chronicle our generation's experience of this cycle of the phenomenon.

I dedicate this modest book to the City of Edmonton that welcomed me, and the world, in general, for our resilience.

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1.

Time, Movement, and the Pandemic

Adhora Ahmed

TIME feels different since the pandemic started. It marches on like it always has, waiting for no one, and yet it moves so slowly like it has an infinite reservoir of patience. That's why the last two years do not feel like two whole years. The calendars say we are in 2022, but it seems like 2020 is still stretching onwards into the present, with no intention to snap back into the past. Time is both a cheetah and a sloth. The pandemic has also redefined movement.

During these two years, or perhaps the continuation of the first, the world has

acted like a moving car that never had to stop. But now, it had to switch off the engine for a while, eventually daring to press on the gas while stepping on the brake every now and then.

If my pandemic-warped brain serves me right, COVID-19 started to make its rounds on the news in the early days of 2020, when it didn't even have a proper name. I was at a junction in my life, a fresh high school graduate with eyes pointing to the West but unsure whether my feet would end up growing roots, thus tethering me to the earth. I wanted to fulfill my childhood dream of going abroad for higher studies – maybe Canada, maybe the United States – and sent my university applications within January.

Excitement and trepidation ruled my heart. I daydreamed of my life at a sprawling

campus adorned with fall colours and snow, but if my applications were rejected, I would have to stay back in Bangladesh. By then, I had become tired of my country's education system, which is another story, so I had no wish to stay back.

I did not pay much attention to the pandemic at first. My mind was already preoccupied with a different kind of uncertainty. Then came March, and something called lockdown appeared to make one country after another fall under its spell like dominoes. Soon, Bangladesh followed suit. I had already received a few rejection letters, my heart sinking a bit lower with each one.

At the beginning of April, the University of Alberta and another Canadian university sent me acceptance letters. I was elated, but that feeling was soon overruled

by unprecedented anxiety. The world stopped so suddenly. Time stopped, too; one day looking exactly like the next. This letter told me that I would have to move through time and space, across entire continents, into a drastically different time zone. With everything at a standstill, was it even possible?

I wouldn't have to worry about the logistical impossibilities because Zoom and the internet's myriad tools bridged the gaps. And thus, in terms of learning space, my bedroom was substituted for the university campus. I was at university, and yet I wasn't. Days kept bleeding into each other to form a blur. Somehow, a year passed, and I wondered if I would end up graduating in this limbo state.

Suddenly, a silver lining glimmered on the horizon. There was a stamp on my

passport, the borders were relaxed, and I could pass through. Time rushed by as I fretted over tickets, suitcases, bookings, and everything in between. I lost sleep overthinking everything that could go wrong, and my stress escalated because of the Delta variant.

Finally, with my frayed nerve endings, I made the giant leap to Canada. I landed with a thud and struggled to gain my footing until classes and routine helped prop me up. And yet, some mornings, I expect to wake up to my old bedroom back home. Not a wish, but an expectation, as though I'm still there. I've been feeling this a lot lately.

This winter term, all my classes have been shifted online. Here I am again, stuck in another bedroom, hunched over my laptop. All the days feel the same. It's almost like

how it was back home, except it's much colder here.

I have moved continents, and yet I haven't. My distorted senses are acting up again, deluding me into wondering if I really got on that plane and flew all the way here. Time and movement feel strange in this pandemic.

2.

Away

Carly Wurz

STAGED and staggered, but the pandemic's grip on us began loosening. The warmer months held a level of promise that had become foreign to us all. Miraculously, Calaway Park managed to open ahead of Stage 3 in Alberta's reopening plan, while other amusement parks still had to wait in limbo. This was because we were completely outdoors and willing to go above and beyond the already established guidelines from other operating parks across North America.

The park's ecosystem absorbed the new precautions fairly seamlessly. After all, safety was the binding thread that connected everything we did at Calaway. Some guests would forget this and insist, to the point of tears, that their little girl's ponytail constituted the missing two inches she needed to ride.

The park's slogan, "Your Smile is Our Mission," took a bit more inventiveness to achieve, with every smile hidden beneath an N-95 mask. Though it was hard, we knew it wouldn't be impossible. We earned each day through hardened blisters on our heels, dry and cracked knuckles from incessant hand sanitizing, pimples underneath our masks, disinfectant sprayed in our eyes, and tans on only half of our faces.

Discomfort was a daily occurrence as our dark-blue uniform khakis dug into our

crotches, and the beating sun tempted us to roll up our already short sleeves. Humid face shields were secured to the bills of our hats, sometimes hanging on with three clips if we were lucky, and with as few as one if we were careless. We had a whole host of new rules to add on top of the already memorized ones hidden in our ride spiels.

I squirmed at the sheer absurdity and the puzzled expression on people's faces when I clinically explained why the high-intensity rides operated with masking and capacity reduced by half because of people screaming and releasing high amounts of droplets from their mouths. Telling people not to run in the ride area was a lot easier. Over time, these new routines became ingrained in us all.

A line each morning formed outside of the security booth, and we had our

employee IDs and foreheads ready for scrutiny. "In the last fourteen days have you experienced any cough, cold, or flu-like symptoms?" eventually devolved into: "Have you got the 'Rona?"

Under our masks was a knowing smile. The log flume pit crew at Timber Falls was born out of the pandemic. We practiced our own sort of alchemy, transferring the contents of several quarter-full bottles of disinfectant to make one full one. Setting the nozzle on the bottle of "Cala-spray" to mist was paramount for optimal surface area coverage.

After the guest disembarked the still moving log, it was one spritz on the back, two on the sides, then two on the handrail opposite to you, taking care not to spray the arm of the person across from you.

Our crescent moon backs twinged, and our quads burned from lunging, but it was mindless in the best possible way. The absence of thought and abundance of conversation allowed many friendships to form over the fibreglass lumber floating down the conveyor belt mote. I slowly felt my terror towards other people melt away with each day I shared with them.

I worked especially hard to ensure kids would never be scared of me. Their shaking knees and concave posture as they contemplated the two-foot drop from the miniature royal blue bi-planes was a sight to behold. I lifted them by their underarms and plopped them onto their feet, which carried them swiftly to their parents. My heart swelled as they raised their arms up to be held, trusting me unconditionally to keep them safe.

I wouldn't call what we did heroic. No one was clanging pots and pans out of their windows for us, but I was proud of what we did for people. Calaway Park became the one unnecessary necessity keeping us sane.

For everyone at Calaway, it could be said that we weren't pretending the pandemic didn't exist; we were instead fulfilling a cavernous need for normalcy. We operated in the long shadow of COVID-19, but it didn't mean the sun wasn't there, on occasion, peaking out. A simple escape was what we all desperately needed. A way to breathe the same air as each other for even a moment.

The costumed fairies taught children how to "air high-five" and complimented them on their vibrant face masks as though it was something they'd always done. Every day at Calaway was a reminder that the

capacity to experience joy still existed within our new normal. One inconsequential ride on the roller coaster could make everything in the world make sense again for those two-and-a-half minutes.

3.

I Watched the Sun Go Down

Olajide Salawu

I have heard stories of missing bags. Bags that arrive in Paris instead of Heathrow. Bags that won't depart at all while the owner is in China. Bags that get loaded with strange items. Bags that get torn and half of the items are missing. Can you imagine my bags getting torn and all my books and essentials gone? God forbid bad thing! I won't start my Edmonton story like this. I waited patiently as the machine emptied its mouth. Heavy suitcases cruised out, but not my athletic travel bags. Calm down, Jide. It should not

be a worry since others here were waiting too.

Fifteen minutes later, the bags arrived. I put them in the cart and pushed toward Exit 9. I approached the Yellowcab driver. I guessed he was Indian because of his tone and inflections.

“I am a student at the University of Alberta. Are you one of the registered taxis that should take us to Lister Centre?” He nodded and gestured in a way that suggested he wanted me to show him my printed slip.

“Oh yes, there you go.” He flipped open the folded slip, then unlocked the car’s trunk.

My Joola athletic bag was heavy with the culinary articles I brought from Nigeria. The other was an American Flyer bag containing my clothes. I dropped them in the

trunk while he adjusted. Due to Covid protocol, there was a barrier between the driver and the backseat where I sat. I strapped on my seatbelt. The driver headed out of Edmonton International Airport toward the road linking Northwest of Edmonton.

I arrived from Toronto around 2 p.m. to continue my quarantine journey in Edmonton. The sun was still up, highlighting the beauty of the hotels and storeyed buildings lining up the roadside. It was my first time in Edmonton. The university had made lodging arrangements at the Lister Centre for all international students. I was told how to locate registered taxis, what to show them, and how to get to Lister in case none of the taxis showed up.

As a first timer, I considered this strange. But hasn't Covid taught everyone how to survive? How when weird policies

arrive quickly, "You Must Learn to Fly Again," like the profound title of Odia Ofeimun's poem?

The taxi windows were slightly tinted, so the rays didn't have much power to sear my tropic skin. The trip would last for about thirty minutes. I spent my time admiring the sprawling beauty of Edmonton zipping by my windows.

"I am from Bangladesh. I've been here fifteen years. It's summer. You'll enjoy it," the driver said.

My breathing was heavily hampered because of the nose mask.

"Okay," I replied.

Lister's veranda was empty when we got there. The car halted close to the entrance. A directive had been pasted on the door to ring an electronic bell. I rang it twice but got no response. In his haste to go, the

driver dialled the number at the entrance. A few minutes later, a lady appeared, and I showed her my registration slip. I thanked the driver as he headed back to his cab.

“You are arriving from?” the lady asked.

“Toronto.”

“And you’re from?”

“Nigeria.”

I would be lodged at Room 213, she said. I dragged my bags behind her as she led the way. When I entered, everywhere looked bare of humans. My door was at the end of one of the corridors on the second floor. She handed me the key and said dinner had already been served, so I could only have water and cookies. Garri has always been my trusted ally on any journey. I would depend on it again to survive the thrall of hunger.

I sat on the white-sheet bed and watched the sun's glow. The day was fast approaching its end. I was tired and could hardly do any unpacking. I lay lazily on the bed while the sunlight filtered through the window vanes. Quarantine teaches one about prison in a small way, though not necessarily the rowdiness and horrors of Mandala, Ilorin, and how fragile the world is.

I stayed afloat the tide of solitude with non-fungible things: my lover's face constantly on the screen. Her jokes sitting firmly at the corner of my mind. I kept her hostage on video calls and survived on emoticons, stickers, emojis, and banters about ordinary things. I would complete my quarantine in eleven days. I got used to the day dimming and the sun tanning at the end of the day, to the memories of nights without the sun. I gazed out my window, at the

passing automobiles and people wearing masks sauntering by as I turned on the IRCC Arrival Scan app.

4.

Chasing Dawn

Dominik Royko

HEART sinks at the sight of the end-of-pavement sign. I slow, wheels sink into gravel. Damn, how much of this before the next decent highway? Laden logging trucks lumber past, heading the other way. The gravel gets softer, clumpier. Noisier. I turn up the music. That high whistle sounds out of tune in this song. And not quite on rhythm. Wait, why is it synchronized with a flashing light on the dash?

Shit. Engine's overheating. Blast the heater, roll down the windows, shift out of

gear, ease over to the side of the road. Let's take stock. How the hell do you open the hood on this car?? Why, oh why, did I buy a car with no owner's manual? Oh, there. Subtle dark gray latch, moulded to the contour of the dark gray side panel at ankle level. Fahrvergnügen.

Pop. Oh, looks like my coolant reservoir is dry. No spare coolant, of course. But I have water. Could try pouring a couple of litres in. Weather's warm. Should be fine until I can get to a town. Bit of a hiss as it's going down, though. And the thirsty engine gulps even the second bottle without raising the level.

Some burbling. Dripping. Under the car, a wet patch of gravel. Phone map shows I'm not too far from the next junction. And no cell signal.

The plan was to stay isolated. Sleep in the car. Let the moose, yellow-headed blackbirds, wolves, and bears be my guides. Enough granola bars and water to last the three-day trip. Well, had enough water.

Thankfully, there's a noisy timber operation through the trees, and it's only early I reach for my mask, swallow my pride, and begin bushwhacking towards the machinery.

"Any uh... chance of getting a tow truck around here?"

A Cree man who knows the lay of the land gives me a lift to the top of the hill. Knows where you can get a spotty cell signal. Knows a towing outfit in town, 50 miles south. I make the call. He takes me back to the car and checks to see if he can help my hobbled steed. He's loath to leave

me alone, waiting, but I assure him the tow guy said he would be here fairly soon.

I photograph wildflowers in the ditch and chase the butterflies in my stomach for an hour. The enormous flatbed dwarfs my little station wagon. I briefly consider how much this escapade will wind up costing. But I am grateful.

“Oh, from Edmonton? My uncle is a coach for the Oilers. Know ‘im?” My chauffeur regales me with factoids as we move through the boreal.

“Yeah, the logging trucks really mess up these gravel roads. They have to fix them every year.”

We see more bears. Two cubs scampered up the road bank, followed by Mama.

“Two brothers from Quebec bought a huge chunk of land over there, started mining peat moss.”

The tow drops me off at his friend’s repair shop, an hour before closing. They’re in the midst of another job but say they’ll take a look. The butterflies settle enough for me to eat a granola bar.

When they roll my car into the bay, the mechanic quizzes me about what happened. He glances at my Alberta licence plate. “So, you’re just driving around?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” Pause. “I was hoping to catch the eclipse tomorrow,” I finally fess up.

“There’s an eclipse? What kind? Lunar or solar?”

“Just partial solar. But it should be visible right at sunrise.” “Won’t catch me up that early.”

Plan A was a provincial park north of Thunder Bay. That would have been the best readily accessible location, I figured. But then Ontario closed its borders. Plan B was a campground near The Pas, Manitoba. I guess Hudson Bay, Saskatchewan, is where fate has steered me.

Phone says weather forecast is promising, at least. Looks like I've made it far enough to clear the cloud front blanketing the western prairies. The coolant leak was from a radiator hose, probably knocked loose by a rock on the sketchy road. They clamp it back on and zip-tie my precariously dangling radiator roughly into place.

"Now, you know this is a temporary fix. But there's no reason it shouldn't get you home."

And still a few hours of daylight left to scout locations for the celestial show. I breathe a quiet thank you to the universe. At dawn, by the park path along the irrigation canal, I set up my tripod and point my lens to the northeastern horizon. Patiently, the sparrows, the red-wings, and I watch the sun and moon climb slowly together into the blue.

5.

A House for Mr. Biswas and Shama

Ahsan Chowdhury

THE lights had barely gone up in the cathedrals of consumption this second year of the pandemic when we ended up with two kittens in our house. My first-year English classes weren't taking a shine to A House for Mr. Biswas. My parents-in-law, who are in their second childhood, routinely fumigated the aging house in the South Edmonton neighbourhood we call "home away from home" with the pungent aroma of curries they cooked compulsively in between bickering about small things. My wife and I divided our time between acting as

caregivers/referees and pursuing our respective economically gainful activities.

Working remotely while living in self-imposed near quarantine felt like watching a pendulum that tends to freeze in extreme positions for oppressively long periods.

Skulking students and demanding clients with their videos off at the other end of a Zoom Meeting or WhatsApp call, and four aging human beings living in close quarters for months on end, with no growing children to interject with lusty yells, echoing laughter, gushing tears, and monumental rages.

My wife and I had been brought up in the Indian subcontinent at a time government promoted birth control as good citizenship to those with the means and bribed the poor to get themselves sterilized. When we finally left the parental nests after living there briefly as a newly married couple,

we suddenly found ourselves struggling to make ends meet, let alone start a family of our own. As a lecturer at a public university, I did not make enough to put rice and curry on the table after paying the rent. Later, the stipend I got as a grad student teacher at American universities put cornbread on the table, but not much else.

By the time we became Canadian citizens, our biological clocks had slowed down so much that even a very expensive IVF treatment could not produce the miracle. In the absence of funds, the hope of adoption from the erstwhile homeland dried up like a runoff pond after a delayed monsoon. Pets remained out of the question for a long time on health and religious grounds.

Finally, the example of my brother-in-law, who lives in Australia, and the exhortations of a Sufi Muslim couple who live

in another part of Edmonton tipped the balance in favour of cats.

“The Prophet loved cats and always had one,” said our friends.

My brother-in-law, who breaks all sorts of taboos as a professional photographer but objects to pets on health grounds, caved in when his two sons threatened their mother in an Aussie accent, “Mom, we’ll tell our kids how you didn’t let us have a pet.”

So, enter Muezza, a gorgeous female tabby named after Prophet Muhammad’s favourite cat, into my wife’s only brother’s antipodean household. Pictures and videos flooded my parents-in-law and my wife’s WhatsApp and Facebook accounts.

My brother-in-law posted videos of himself grooming the furry little bundle of cuteness with a high-tech brush that

allegedly catches every hair during the shedding season. The final straw that broke the pet-shunning camel's back—no disrespect to the camels the Prophet knew and loved—was a video of my wife's little nephew holding Muezza in his arms.

The pet-less ground having softened as if the first heavy spell of monsoon rains had drenched it, we began looking for free kittens to adopt. Eventually, we found two in Edson.

A few kilometres west of Edson, a farmer was giving away a large litter produced by her prized mouser. Among these were two that looked exactly like Muezza. On a snowy morning during the reading week, we drove up to Edson and picked up the two kittens. We picked up a spacious patio from another animal lover on our way back to Edmonton. Late that night, we reassembled

the cat condo and put the sleepy little animals in a small, quilted basket on the third tier. Barely a week had gone by. The kittens already had the run of the entire house.

One fine morning, as I was teaching A House for Mr. Biswas live on Zoom, the as-yet-unnamed kittens jumped up, landed on my desk, and paraded in front of the camera. Instantly, the hitherto dark and empty Zoom screen was populated by youthful faces. Several asked me if my kittens had names. I thought for a moment. I had just pointed out that there was more to Mr. Biswas's ill-considered name-calling of his mother-in-law, Mrs. Tulsi, as the "Holy Roman cat," and her sons as the "kittens," than his love of invective.

"Mr. Biswas and Shama," I replied.

6.

The Pandemic and Me

Ari Okai

I was the last employee to be laid-off at my workplace. For three months after most of my colleagues stopped showing up, I continued working at the customer service desk despite the rising uncertainty spreading across the globe. At the time, the thought of spending time at home was quite appealing to me. I had spent the best parts of the previous couple of years chasing thrills in different parts of the world, trying as much as possible to immerse myself in cultures very foreign to mine.

I succeeded in that endeavour and was, in fact, plotting for more – a quick getaway to Medellin, Colombia. I was looking to capitalize on the all-time low fares amidst the growing ambiguity of country restrictions at the time. Fortunately, the plans did not materialize as lockdowns spread like wildfire, leaving many tourists stranded as most of the world was thrust into a premature hibernation period.

Even though I was not getting premium arepas and \$10 full-body massages at the beach, I gradually embraced the general change in gears. However, after many months of denial, binge-watching various foreign mini-series, and essentially stamping my digital footprint all over the internet, I resolved to do something a bit more rewarding.

From past experiences, I found that an effective way of getting rid of undesirable habits was by simply engaging in new and healthier ones. Problems only arise if the substitute habit is not adequate. In my case, my fitness level had plummeted, and my serotonin levels were all over the place due to long periods of couch idleness and Uber Eats deliveries. So, three months into the first of what was to be many lockdowns, I began the journey to a better physique and cardio.

Of course, it was not easy. What was left of the discipline I developed from doing shift work had vanished, and conjuring motivation to wake up at 9 a.m. daily to work out did not compute in the beginning. But with all the newfound free time on my hands, I thought up creative ways to persevere. Unluckily for me, the momentum I was

building came to a screeching halt when I aggravated an old injury and dislocated my shoulder because of my improper handling of dumbbells.

The doctors at Montfort Hospital were swamped, and what should have typically taken about one hour to fix saw me spending over twelve hours of agony at the ER. At this point, the pandemic and I were at odds. After finding out that I would require arthroscopic surgery to eliminate the threat of future dislocations on my shoulder, I plunged into even deeper despair.

Four months into the pandemic and at the ripe age of twenty-eight, I had already been presented with so many firsts. Now contemplating an additional year of recuperation in addition to the fitness battle already ahead of me was daunting.

Defeated, I decided to get the surgery done and tailor a fitness regime around my recovery. By a stroke of luck, my orthopedic surgeon was able to get me under the knife within a month, right before the second lockdown.

The recovery process presented me with a chance to cultivate the self-discipline I had longed for. Waking up at 9 a.m. was now necessary in order to regain the full function of my limb. And so, almost every morning, I would be in my living room working on chiselling mind and body, staying hard à la David Goggins.

During this time, my nephew, who had moved back into our family home accompanied by his mother, was also experiencing a number of personal firsts, including but not limited to virtual learning. Like most eight-year-olds, learning from the

comfort of one's home presented new challenges, and eventually, his schoolwork suffered.

After a year and some change removed from surgery, I am now almost fully healed and still very much committed to a healthier lifestyle. I have been tagged an anti-vaxxer by some of my fellow citizens. But through my nephew, I am much more. I am now a father figure, an ever-present uncle, and most importantly, a human with renewed optimism.

Although I am still on leave, I am launching an e-commerce store for my art and continue to look for the silver lining in all matters. A better sense of control ripples through my life, and I am grateful for the shift in perspective that the pandemic brought. Life is short.

That said, I pray for the peaceful
repose of the souls we have lost to the
pandemic and that, as one human race, we
are able to overcome this great ordeal.

7.

My Plague Diary

Katherine Koller

IN March 2020, I began to keep a gratitude diary amid the lockdown, closures, loss, and fear. Words on a page continue to keep me sane. Weirdly, I came across this comparison between words and virus in a disaster diary/artbook by Laurie Anderson on March 16, the day before lockdown started in Edmonton: "Both virus and language act like they're alive but are not. A virus is lifeless, has no cell structure and has been called one of the organisms at the edge of live. Technically, it is an agent. Like language, it can wedge its way into the codes, into the

DNA and change the basic meaning.” (All the Things I Lost in the Flood, 171).

I’d had that book on my desk for weeks before I randomly leafed through it that day. The similarity of virus and language both scared and calmed me. Perhaps the latter was an antidote for the former; at least the two seemed pitted against each other. We all read news and searched for facts to step on as the virus became a tsunami, marked by its waves.

I turned to reading. I kept news at the minimum (first Edmonton death on March 20, hand sanitizers, masks, restrictions, closures, vaccinations, openings, testing) but focused on books.

While my talks and teaching all pivoted online, my friends and books kept me engaged. Books kept me close to people. The authors who spoke in my ear ruffled my

heart and settled in my blood. I even encouraged my husband, who normally does not love to read, to begin a Book Club for gearheads, and it has been a great success for him and his car enthusiast buddies.

To rest our eyes, we sometimes did twice-daily walks. We tread our neighbourhood, every changing detail, and tried to be outdoors as much as possible. The air, we felt, was cleaner, the sky, bluer, and full of birdsong. Apart from our stupor mundi outside, we began to explore the dramatic offerings online, and never have we spent so much time in front of the television as in the last two years. Now we are trying to wean ourselves down to four or five times a week.

At home, so much more than before, I sensed more pleasure given to each task. There was more time for everything. I could take my time to do my best and be more

intentional – be it cooking, shopping, or cleaning. Or reading and writing.

I expressed my gratitude for this in my journal, where I continue to look for the light. I record my pandemic predictions (more home reno, gardening, outdoor events), pandemic panaceas (turmeric tea, calling friends and family, observing animals), and pandemic activities (attending masterclasses, letting time clarify solutions, drawing).

When I read a book I enjoy, I recommend it heartily. I often send the author a note. I've written a little about every book I've read for years now, for myself, and for future reference.

Since the pandemic began, I have read 75 books – novels, story collections, plays. I added two poem-a-day subscriptions on my email, three word-a-day subscriptions, and several listservs, which provide my

online reading. Besides Scrabble online, I now play Wordle daily.

Writing and reading are how I survive, and language is how I'll survive this virus. Words make more words, just as viruses make more viruses. I keep faith that words will persevere, so I'll continue "My Plague Diary" because it feels good when I write down my thanks. A pause from the pandemic. Hope.

8.

Tinder, the Pandemic, and Me

Stephanie Yearley

Of all the times to start online dating, during a pandemic is likely the worst, but that didn't stop me. In fact, it was the boredom and social isolation that got me to sign up for Tinder, even if I told my friends I was doing it as a joke. After exchanging a few messages, people would ask me why I was on the app, presumably inquiring if I was looking for love in a time of COVID or just to hook up. I'd reply semi-honestly, "I came for the meme but stayed for the validation."

While the matches and messages were indeed validating, the dates I went on did not

do as much to pet my ego. On my first and only date with M, we donated blood and then went for a walk. After I responded openly to a question about how I was doing, they asked me if I was taking any meds about that.

On my second date with J, we watched a movie in my basement. We also talked about life. They then told me that I seemed “deeply unhappy” with mine. I responded that it was an awful perceptive for someone who had just met me.

Anyway, not all the people I went out with expressed concern about my head or my heart. In fact, one of them was nice enough to call me funny, smart, and interesting when they broke up with me.

Though the pandemic rages on, my quest for whatever it is that the sirens of online dating sing about has ended. I am

single as ever... and also banned from Tinder for reasons largely unknown.

While I failed to find romance (if that was even what I had endeavoured to do), I did make a couple of good friends. Most importantly, I learned that validation is fleeting, so if I am looking for it outside myself, I am looking to be, as J said, "deeply unhappy."

9.

Sunday Sojourns

Kristin Zelyck

IN the early days of the pandemic, when everything was closed and the streets were eerily quiet, we looked for ways to pass this unusual season of life with our four children. Typically, our weekends were filled with extra-curricular activities, hosting brunches with neighbours, and gathering at our local parish for Mass. And, suddenly, everything was on hold.

A few years back, I received the guidebook, *The Best of Alberta: Day Trips* from Edmonton, written by Joan Marie Galat. I had leafed through the book and marked

places we planned to visit, but we never seemed to have the time.

At the start of the pandemic, what we gained in time, we lacked in space. As recreation centers, movie theatres, shopping malls, and even playgrounds closed, we were confined to our home and our daily walks through the neighbourhood. Our house began to feel full as our four kids transitioned to online school.

One evening, I was putting away the school supplies when the guidebook caught my eye. Pulling the book off the shelf, I flipped to the earmarked pages and began to wonder, "What if?" What if we could take road trips, day trips, from Edmonton and explore a little? If I packed enough food and downloaded a good audiobook, we would only need to stop for gas. Perhaps a short road trip would be a welcome escape from

home, even though the mandate was to “stay home.”

Almost immediately, with anticipation, I spent the evening rereading the guidebook and planning our first road trip north(east) of the city.

The first Sunday, we packed up the car and hit the road around 10 a.m. Our kids wore comfy clothes and brought their blankets, pillows, and books. They were excited about the adventure ahead. I packed water, snacks, toilet paper, and hand sanitizer.

From Edmonton, we travelled northeast to Redwater on Highway 28. We ventured as far as Smoky Lake, and the whole trip lasted about six hours. As we left the city, the wide snow-covered land captured our attention. We breathed a sigh of relief as we drove down the road and looked

forward to our adventure. The kids eagerly pointed out different wildlife, historical buildings, bodies of water, and beautiful open skies.

We took advantage of roads off the main highway to stop and stretch our legs and whoop for the fun of being somewhere new. We returned home with a messy car, cramped legs, and some good memories. The kids eagerly asked when we could plan another trip.

During the week, we worked through online lessons, went on our daily walks, and practiced Cosmic Yoga with YouTube videos. We also planned our weekend road trip, intending to drive in a different direction from the previous week. The children had created scavenger hunts so we could have a running activity for each road trip.

For the following six weeks, we set out to explore. As we got closer to our Sunday road trip, there was excitement in the air. It was a welcome relief from the ongoing pandemic. The guidebook provided some historical and current context for each town and landmark with base statistics such as population, namesake, and the date of establishment.

I read out excerpts from the guidebook to the kids as we travelled. Sometimes they ignored me, and other times it piqued their interest. We stopped to read as many "Alberta history" billboards as possible to learn something about the places we visited.

It seemed like our girls' social studies lessons started coming to life. We were fascinated by landmarks like the Redwater Discovery Derrick and the famous murals in

Stony Plain. We diverted from the major roads to follow the C & E trail, the Klondike trail, the Victoria trail, and the Métis crossing.

In each new place, we admired historical buildings and sites. Standing on the Athabasca landing, we were in awe of the powerful river melting in the spring and crashing down the riverbed. We were enthralled by the beauty of the Boreal forests near Fort Assiniboine. We visited Thunder Lake Provincial Park and dreamt about the coming warm weather and the possibility of summer picnics.

As spring passed and the weather warmed, restrictions began to lift, and the need to escape our house faded. We compiled our photos and notes to create a short memory book of our road trips. I asked my husband what we should call our memory

book. He thought for a while and then replied, "Sunday Sojourns." It fits.

As the pandemic enters its fifth wave, it may be time to resume Sunday sojourns. There are so many places in our guidebook that we have yet to see.

10.

Today

Luciana Erregue-Sacchi

TODAY we did not talk about how many died
in Italy
We talked instead of Joseph and the shirt test
And how upon seeing him, the women
slashed their hands by accident
He was that handsome.
We talked of how Confucius' face greeted me
every morning
From my parents' library
Where I slept.
Of Van Gogh's sister, a frustrated writer
Of Tolstoy's love-hate marriage to Sophia,
and how

She transcribed *War and Peace* over and over
as she
Birthed him four children in five years.
Today I told you about my dream
We were making love in a hotel
Nothing special.
Today we did not talk about my elderly
parents Enscoced in a small town
With just four ventilators and ten Hail Marys
In the middle of the Pampas
Or that I am afraid we will run out of food
Or disinfectant
Or how many hours I scroll online
Waiting for the *I Ching* to assure me
I will never see a social media feed again
And we will all breathe.

- Written in April 2020

11.

Confinement Pet

Ifeoma Chinwuba

WHEN the retired couple across from us bought a dog, I became apprehensive. I live in a terrace house with my two sons, a daughter, and my grandson, Zik, who is seven. Three generations of our family live in my house. I am a writer, and I work from home, which means I am the unofficial babysitter. And the housekeeper, cook, and cleaner.

Many of our neighbours own pets, canines, in the main, but a few cats as well. Zik and I used to sit at the kitchen window and watch as people walked their pets. A

pastime that became a routine during the lockdown. I knew it was a matter of time before he would want one.

“Grandma, can you buy me a pet?”

“What kind of pet?” I asked, playing along.

“A horse,” came the reply.

It jolted me out of my chair. I should have known. Zik has always liked horses, and he has a couple of toy ones galloping and jumping. Sometimes, when I knelt on the exercise mat, he would sneak in on me, climb my back and whip, “Whoa! Giddy up!”

“Where would we park it?” I asked, trying to make up a reason to dissuade him from his lofty desire. “We don’t even have a garage for our cars.”

He reflected for a second, then blurted out, “What about a pony, then?”

Oh, yeah, there's a difference between the two!

"We could tie him up in the field over there," he donated. Sure, and save City Hall the cost of mowing the field.

Very thoughtful, Zik!

"Well, he can't be outside in the cold; you know, rain, snow. That would make him sad."

"What about our basement? He could manage the basement?" "Which basement?" Jonni, my eldest son, flared from the dining table. He was lord of the basement manor. His tone alone scared his nephew into silence.

"There you go. The basement is out," I said. "And the pony." "What about a puppy, then?"

His eyes were full of glee and expectation as if to say, "Our neighbours have dogs; we could too."

"Dogs need a lot of care," I explained patiently. "You would have to take it for walks, feed it, play with it."

"Grandma, you are fat," he whipped.

"You can walk the dog."

"I already walk you to school, dear," I retorted, smarting over the reference to my weight. "That's enough exercise."

"You would have someone to chat with, keep the house lively," Zik added.

I get a fair share, I wanted to tell him, but he would not understand. There were enough conniptions between the siblings – Hurry up in the bathroom! Who took my salad? Drank my soda?

“Thanks, Zik, but I do not speak the canine language. And you can’t learn to be left-handed at old age.”

“Cat, then? Let’s get a cat.”

Feeling nostalgic, I remember that back in Nigeria, people had cats to help them catch rats, especially in the grocery stores.

“Do we have rats?” I asked Zik.

“Yes, we do,” Jonni answered again from his spot in the dining room. “I have set a trap.”

“Good. Then Zik can have the rat for a pet.”

“But I don’t want a rat,” he wailed.

“Why? It’s furry and--”

“It’s too small,” he interjected.

Just then, as if on cue, two squirrels raced each other across our lawn.

“There you go,” I told Zik. “Two big furry pets, right there. You can leave food

and water out for them. You don't need another pet. You already have two."