

# LIFE IN UPHEAVAL

Alberta writers respond to COVID-19

## JASPREET SINGH AFTER C-19

MORE BAD NEWS STARTED POURING IN from Italy and France and Spain. Switzerland, one of the most affected countries, declared a nationwide emergency. This writer's residency—in a small village in Switzerland on the gentle slopes of the Jura Mountains—was going to shut down indefinitely. I packed my suitcase, not knowing what awaited me. It was near impossible to contact the airline.

The day I packed my bags was followed by a long night when I got my first anxiety attack (of 2020). I recovered, certain I was not going to let it become as bad as it had after 9/11. I was "fine." Fortunately, the head of the residency made a generous exception for the last two remaining writers, me and a novelist from Germany. We were allowed to continue and self-isolate in our studios—studios designed with solitude in mind.

If I stay here, I thought, I will also make way for someone who needs to return to Canada more urgently than I do. It is lockdown and quarantine more or less all over the world. Here I will be able to walk and reflect and write, I thought. I was fine with the föhn winds (all that is solid melts in the air) and the unnecessary spring. Bees, ladybugs, electric-spark houseflies and small leaves fledged. I was not able to write, but I was fine surveying the dystopian world online and witnessing the collapse of fictions most countries in the world tell about themselves, until a

fortnight later a boulder-heavy band gripped around my chest—a near continuous shortness of breath, a sore throat and a nose/eye infection and insatiable thirst for water.

Contagion?

No, said the stoic village doctor, no, he said, no, when he visited me the second time. "What you are going through is extreme levels of anxiety." The thing was exacerbated by my PTSD (connected to surviving the pogroms in India in 1984). He opened his home-healthcare shoulder bag and took out a benzodiazepine medication. He had lots of Lorazepam in his black bag. There was more than a metre's distance between us and yet we could not look each other in the eye. What if my negative test result (the nose swab sample analyzed by the lab) was actually a "false negative?" I asked. The doctor readjusted his facemask. So did I, both worried about ourselves and each other, and I knew the first few scenes, the opening chapters of the rest of my life. Both the doctor and I, in strange solidarity, waiting, for now, for *afterwardsness*, if such a thing remains possible in a world gone logarithmically ambiguous. The only certainty: this catastrophe will be followed by yet another. Perhaps both of us in silent agreement that there was still room for hope in an epoch of unhope, that in the days ahead what "we" (each person on this planet) do, and what we don't do, and what is done to us, may change our highly interconnected lives and our planet more than a world changed by a virus.

## JASMINA ODOR HARD, SHARP AND DANGEROUS

IN THOSE EARLY MARCH DAYS when the epidemic became a pandemic I was home with a newborn, my first baby. He had arrived during that deadly week in January when Edmonton was locked down by unceasing temperatures in the minus forties. We took him home from the hospital in the evening darkness of that cold, on roads completely covered in hard ice—the baby bundled and tiny and squished-looking in the brand new car seat, my husband turning off the main road into our neighbourhood as soon as he could, losing his nerve with the usual traffic. Before the elation of bringing the baby into the warm house, we were tense and terrified of any inadvertent slip—not being able to stop at a light, skidding out on a turn. Once home I thought I never want to leave this house again. In the weeks that followed I paid only peripheral attention to COVID-19. When I met a friend for coffee on my first outing sans baby, and she suggested we plan a visit with both our families "before the pandemic hits," I was surprised. Of course, she was right—within a few weeks we were all in lockdown.

The pandemic is, in fact, much like first-time parenthood. Few things make us feel as vulnerable as being the sole guardians of tiny helpless beings we want so much to thrive, and thrive in safety. You can no longer, for instance, see anything in your house not in relation to your child's safety; there's a quality of terror, as if the light has changed slightly to suddenly reveal innocent objects as hard and sharp and dangerous. And COVID-19 has given us an equivalent of that vulnerability on a social and global scale. The danger seems everywhere, in all the ordinary and until recently harmless things of our daily lives—our grocery cart, our mail, the friendly family passing us on the trail. Our parents and friends. As with a baby, the risk is low but the consequence potentially so terrible that we dare not relax our vigilance.

And of course we can't anyway, because in the case of this pandemic, one person's risk is every other person's risk; we are not staying safe only for ourselves. And that is the other stark thing COVID-19 has highlighted for me—the way the health of one of us is related to the health of all of us, just as a baby's well-being depends not only on its parents but also,

in a foundational way, on the whole social, familial and economic net it finds itself in, something akin to water to a fish, hard to see with any perspective because it is so taken for granted. One wishes we could apply this obvious connection to all our social structures, and that when the next pandemic hits we could really be in it together—equally, not just theoretically.

## SID MARTY THE OLD GEEZER'S SHOPPING HOUR

OUR FRIEND BETH PHONED and learned that our eldest son, Paul, was staying overnight in our little guest shack. "Give him a hug for me," she said. Myrna said no. "We have to keep our distance." "Oh," said Beth, sadly. "Well, just poke him with a stick, then!"

For a rural freelance writer the COVID-19 crisis is otherwise a bit surreal. There are not enough hours in a day for me to keep up with the maintenance on our small holding. The season is announced by the chorus frogs and the common snipe and confirmed by a sudden charm of goldfinches as we watch the skies anxiously for late arrivals. And social distancing? I've been doing that since about 1980. If not for my wife, I would turn into a complete hermit. But on our weekly trip into Pincher Creek, for the geezer-only shopping hour, we come face to face with masked strangers (our neighbours) and the peril suddenly gets real.

Still, COVID-19 is mainly an urban stalker; cancer and heart disease thrive everywhere. We're in the cane and pain demographic, a lonely place of disappearing friends, two of them in the last week alone. In the grocery store lineup, white-haired neighbours eye each other over their outlaw bandanas and wonder who's next. Like clay pigeons in a shooting arcade, we totter along our predetermined track, then it's as if a shot rings out because—bing; one of us goes down, never to rise again.

I'm distracted from the pain in the outer world by the terrific pain my wife suffers every day in her joints. They are bone on bone. Meanwhile, Alberta is the only jurisdiction on earth where the doctors are suing the health minister in the middle of the pandemic; they say they will withdraw from the local hospital in July. We support them, but this is an awful worry. My wife is one of thousands of Albertans, some waiting over



two years for so called “elective” surgery, who will now face even longer delays while hospitals operate below capacity, waiting for the next wave of COVID. She can no longer “get down and dirty” in her garden, which is the centre of her life at this time of year.

What we needed were some planters, about 31" high, to allow for stand-up gardening. The local building supply (risky to enter these days) was down to 27 boards. This is where “Thank god I’m a country boy” kicks in. My neighbour has a small sawmill that turns out 1×6 rough stock. “I’ve got a bunch of salvaged 2×4s lying around here also,” he said. “Take ‘em all if you want.” And so I found myself happily at work building two eight-foot-long planters with doubled 2×4 legs to take the weight of soil. The red squirrels and chipmunks watched me with interest; they have learned to follow behind Myrna and dig up every seed she plants. So I framed four screens made of wire mesh no cheeky little varmint can penetrate.

We hear about the record numbers of city people pouring into the garden centres. This is something we all have in common: a desire to grow food in uncertain times, to connect ourselves to a nurturing earth, despite all the pain and grief around us; a desire to make ourselves whole again as we weather these desperate days of the plague.

**KATHERINE GOVIER  
SCRABBLE ADDICT**

MY NAME IS KATHERINE and I am a Scrabble addict. I’m nervous to be Zooming with you all but at least I’m here.

I grew up in a Scrabble-playing family. My father wasn’t as good as my mother, so they fought. When she proved her word with the dictionary, he claimed that the dictionary was wrong. Or that the word was not English.

When I had no friends to play with I’d get out the Scrabble board and make words. When I got a bingo I’d run into the kitchen to tell Mum, Hey look! I used all seven of my letters. She would say, Isn’t that wonderful. Then I’d go back out to the living room and select a bunch of great letters that fit onto my previous word, put them down and run into the kitchen again and say, Look, I did it again. The second time she’d appear quizzical, but she never called me on it.

When my first marriage broke up, Scrabble was a factor. My husband did not like to lose. We had



our biggest fight about whether you could pluralize the word rice. I was sure you could and he said you couldn’t. I had the s and it led to a triple word score.

After the divorce my sister introduced me to a guy across the street. As a kid he had driven all over the prairies with his mother attending Scrabble tournaments. When he pulled his board out of its own little handmade quilted carry-bag, I knew I was dead. He beat me. No rematch.

The next man I married played Scrabble at first. Then he quit, claiming he never got good letters. My son was more of a chess type so he was out. It got down to where only my daughter would play with me. The games were grim and went on for hours.

But those days it was face to face. The downward spiral started when I got into playing online. On Facebook, on websites, with anyone, strangers, dozens at a time. There was never enough. No matter how many games I had going, the moment came when I’d played all my turns and had to sit there with nothing to do. This is in front of my computer, where I used to actually write books.

I swore it wasn’t affecting my life. But it was an obsession. At night I was always running up to my office. First thing in the morning too. My husband had to stand at the foot of the stairs and shout for me. I’d hear his footsteps and close the screen so he couldn’t see what I was doing.

Before COVID-19 I tried to quit. I swore I would stay away from the computer, work in the garden and read books. Then came the virus. It threw me back more than ever to the tiles. I read about Scrabblers Anonymous online. Your stories have made me see there’s more to life than keeping my ratings up. Maybe if I stick with this program I can get back to writing one day.

**SHARON BUTALA  
THE UNBEARABLE RETURN**

WHAT MADE IT ALL SO STRANGE was that for the first month I didn’t know a single person who was sick, not even anyone who knew anyone who was sick much less had died, while on television I watched videos of hazmat-clad doctors and nurses clustered thickly around beds, working on the tube-riddled, unresponsive bodies of the dying. Starting with videos out of Wuhan, China, where I saw a man neatly attired in a black suit, stretched

out on his back on the street, dead—in the night someone must have put him there—on to smuggled cell-phone video of a hospital with bodies lying so thickly on the floor there was no room to walk among them, staff in virtual hysterics and where chaos reigned, to videos of our own calmer, less-congested, if still fiercely alert hospitals with their fast-moving, face-masked, blue-gowned-and-gloved staff. Yet at the same time, when I looked out the windows of my condo, I saw the same playing fields, the two schools, the houses sitting as they always had in quiet rows, no one about other than one or two sauntering by, usually with a leashed dog. No sirens, no ambulances, almost no planes flying over, nothing. Just a silence so great it was eerie.

I couldn’t reconcile the two realities. I kept waiting for them to make sense, even while I obeyed the isolation and distancing rules and didn’t go to the grocery store more than once a week and otherwise pretty much nowhere. I listened to the radio and watched newscast after newscast on television, switching channels, trying to grasp the enormity of the crisis without succumbing to the sneaking fear that it would all end in food riots, lootings and heaps of untended bodies piled in the streets. Or equally, as time passed and the crisis continued to seem distant and unreal, restraining myself from simply saying “To hell with it,” and going to the mall or its equivalent just to break the tension. (Much could be said here about the isolation of the old.)

And yet, my surprising first reaction to the imposed self-isolation had been relief. *Good*, I said to myself, *now I don’t have to pretend I’m normal*, meaning, I can stay home without wondering if I’m missing some exciting or interesting happening, while also feeling guilty and inadequate because I truly am an introvert and, mostly, I’d rather stay home alone or with a friend or two for company and that is seen in our culture as abnormal and unhealthy. But by the end of week seven, when the talk of lifting restrictions began, and still I hadn’t personally witnessed any of it and nobody I knew had been seriously ill or died, mixed with relief that the crisis was really ending, what I felt surprised me. It was intense sadness, even a moment of near-despair, that despite everything everyone around the world had endured and seen, things would almost certainly soon go back to the way they had always been, and that now *that* would be unbearable.



**BASHIR MOHAMED  
DO YOU EVEN KNOW WHAT’S HAPPENING  
RIGHT NOW?**

IN EARLY MAY DURING THE PANDEMIC I thought about my father’s death. I remember my sister shaking me awake on the morning of August 13, 2007. I thought it was nothing, so I went back to sleep. She shook me again but I fell asleep once more. Then she shook me harder, with more urgency, and said, “Do you even know what’s happening right now?”

I went downstairs, where the room was filled with paramedics and my dad lay on the floor. He’d had a heart attack. My other memories of that day are scattered but I still recall the shock I felt when I realized he would not be coming back.

I frequently think about that day and try to remember my dad and how he shaped my life. But so much time has passed; I have forgotten the sound of his voice.

My dad was a worker at the meatpacking plant in Brooks. Our family lived in Edmonton and he would often be gone for months. In Somalia he had been an engineer, but Canada did not recognize his program or give him a simple path to recertification. Meatpacking was one of the few places in Alberta that would accept a worker like him, so he jumped at the chance.

The work was precarious and the management was notorious for caring more about the quality and output of the meat than the actual workers. Many in my position—

young refugees—understand this reality and have a personal connection to these plants. We know that nobody does this work out of choice—they do it so their children can have a shot at different options in the future.

Perhaps this is why the outbreak at the Cargill and JBS meatpacking plants hits so close to home. Because—to be frank—the outbreak lays bare the position of racialized people in Canada, people like me.

Some numbers, early May 2020: Alberta meatpacking plant employees make up more COVID-19 cases than the provinces of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, New Brunswick, PEI and Newfoundland combined. The scale of this outbreak is no accident; it speaks directly to a failure in government, healthcare leadership and meatpacking plant management.

Despite this, one plant—as of this writing—remains open. And another is already returning their employees

JONATHAN DYCK

to the danger within the plant after just two weeks being closed. The lack of concern for these workers is disgusting; it's clear this would never happen if most of the workforce were white.

To me COVID-19 has laid bare the inequalities in our society. That hurts. I am in the military, on notice to move anywhere in Canada during the pandemic. The waiting is stressful but I'm proud to be in a position where I can give back; it's my duty. I wish Canadians could find their sense of duty to meatpacking plant workers. It's shocking to see people who look like me—who work where my dad worked—treated in this country as if they are disposable.

**TRINA MOYLES**  
**THE USE OF FEAR**

THE BEAR EMERGES FROM the willows, a startle of black. I stop. Bear. There. A halo of mosquitoes swarms his molting fur. The willows bend, break under his bulky heft. I avoid his beady eyed stare. Hear his lifted snout. *Snfff, snffff, snffff.*

I shouldn't be surprised to see him. I work alone as a lookout observer at a remote fire tower in the Peace Country. Since April I've encountered more bears than people.

But the fear of coming within 10 metres of a 300-pound predator is so powerful that it practically yanks me out of my skin. I feel fragile. Incompetent. A twig of a woman clutching a canister of bear spray. Everything I had been worrying about—tasks undone, friends uncalled, life goals unfulfilled, dinner unmade—evaporates on the spot. I'm afraid of what's going to happen next.

It wasn't so different with COVID-19. In mid-March, I was supposed to travel to a book event in Switzerland. "I have a bad feeling about this, Trina," a friend told me. He had been reading extensively about COVID-19 cases spreading into South Korea, Iran and Italy. "I don't think you should go." I looked at him skeptically.

A week later Italy's hospitals were overrun with patients. Death count: rising. The country went on lockdown. I watched a video of Italians singing from their balconies. Another of people warning the world: Please, take this seriously. I cancelled my plane ticket to Switzerland.

Words like "quarantine" and "social distancing" became a regular part of my vocabulary. I obsessed over Dr. Hinshaw's daily updates: cautionary advice,

closures, cancellations. Total cases in Alberta: rising. Total global cases: skyrocketing. Even in a small northern town, where "social distancing" is already something of a norm, the streets emptied of people.

I couldn't sleep. I'd wake at 3 a.m., my chest tight, the sheets soaked. I googled symptoms repeatedly. Total global death count: rising. Did I have COVID? Was I unknowingly infecting people far more vulnerable than my 35-year-old, able-bodied self? My freelance writing contracts weren't impacted by COVID, but I struggled to make sense of my panicked thoughts. Word count: 0.

I was afraid for the well-being of my parents. For friends living in cities across Canada, in New York City and sub-Saharan Africa, where some public health officials worried COVID would tear across the continent like a wildfire. Terrified, I watched the UCP's ruthless cuts to health, education and environmental regulation. I learned a new phrase: "Disaster capitalism."

As the snow melted, I packed up my belongings to fly out to the fire tower. "Never been a better time to be a lookout!" my friends joked. But it wasn't the physical isolation I craved; rather, it was the sense of normalcy I felt desperate for, the knowing that when it's hot and dry, there's fire—the familiar chaos in the phenomenon of wildfire.

But beyond the black spruce the indirect chaos of COVID ensues. Horrified, I watch videos of a police SUV running over protesters, a white cop kneeling on the neck of a black man until

his last breath. I say his name: "George Floyd." I am reminded of my white privilege, and that the fear felt by those living in brown and black bodies was infectious long before COVID-19.

*HUFF!*

The bear stares hard at me. My knees are shaking. I'm afraid because I know I'm not in control of what happens next, not entirely. But fear isn't a useful survival tool—not without action, anyway. I remember what the experts say: Carry bear spray. *Remain six feet apart.* Talk to the bear in a low, calm voice. *Wash your hands regularly.* Back away slowly. *Avoid travel outside of Canada.*

The bear ambles back into the woods. I catch my breath again. COVID-19 has made me reconsider: Who and what is sacred to me? How can I transform my fear into positive action?

I climb my tower and watch for smoke. I try to write again. ■



JONATHAN DYCK

# hands in the time of pandemic

**RUDY WIEBE**

whyte avenue is a raw march photograph nothing moves a pickup mutters at the intersection no person visible on blocks of sidewalk only grey light-wired trees only me held erect by my hands wobbly search for two-cane balance so this is the world and here i the pickup leaps at the light

*go home and stay home wash your hands droplets physical distancing do not*

the 104 street green light is long enough for my shufobble walk a long one-cane man coming fast shirtsleeves in the cold his right arm dangles like a limp hose its bare hand flapping madly good morning i say good he says too near my left ear good and miserable i turn slowly he strides on into red o dearest god will my hand sink into that trembling-aspen shudder

*not touch your face self isolate COronaVirusDisease 2019 sanitize ppe stay*

mayday on 106 street offers three distanced joggers also two dogs white bristle and tan smooth tugging a brown girl reading her phone i rest in my wheeled walker watch bristle's nose sweep the grass and stop he pounds his shoulder down his paws claw him into the smell of that spot while tan anoints an ash and the girl's thumbs fly texting my blue hands inter-lace themselves the infinity of things hands can do beyond paws unimaginable

*stay the blazes home alta crude 3.72 a barrel work from home we're all in*

yes sixty years ago i worked from home searching for my first novel in a manual typewriter inside one windowless room of our basement apartment on 109 street but today even in viral isolation a brown girl with dogs can hold the known world in her hands pocket it handy and snug on her buttocks

*in this together flatten the curve 7 of 10 deaths in care homes face masks the*

incredible seven weeks shufobbling in old strathcona an hour a day and the change in my pocket is unchanged but immeasurably more important is home my sheene taunte *lovely lady* in my first language in our 3 storey house where our daughter and granddaughter whose own house is 9 feet from ours excellent physical distancing come laughing to our back porch and hand us home-baked bread and groceries and the front-yard apple tree will bud with the first droplets of spring rain and we lift our hands to each other in love and wave the song without the words and never stop at

*the new normal testing elbow bump caremongering ventilator virtual care*

pestilence no human sense can find it all you need do is breathe you can also bow your head into your hands and pray o creator have mercy on us

**MAYDAY COVID-19 PEOPLE** edmonton 498 infected 12 dead  
alberta 5,573 infected 92 dead canada 55,573 infected  
3,346 dead world 3,420,000 infected  
239,603 dead

no these numbers shall never have the last word

trust work compassion hope