

“THE CORONAVIRUS DIARY”

by

Melba Joyce Boyd,
Detroit, Michigan

March 4, 2020:

Spring Break at Wayne State University has been extended for an additional week, until the university can figure out what to do about the pandemic crisis. The administration advises the faculty to prepare for a shift to virtual classrooms. That sucks. I hate dealing with email, so this is really going to cramp my style. Students will probably dig this though, since half of them are texting, checking their twitter, snap chattin’ and all manner of social circumventions and communication on their phones, while I lecture. At least now, I won’t be background noise outside of their virtual existence.

I went to Ann Arbor today, to drop off my contract for the Black film course I teach every Spring term at the University of Michigan for the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies. I enjoy this gig because I went to graduate school here. So, the climate is familiar and pleasant memories return, reflecting on a time when I was young, nestled in my studies while writing poetry for my first book. I always feel calm and comfortable in this space. Perhaps because it was a burial ground for the Ojibwa before the European invasion.

But, today the campus is quiet, when it should be buzzing with students crisscrossing the diag in front of the Hatcher Graduate Library. The university president cancelled classes, and faculty are hustling to reorganize their courses for online teaching. I expect this will be the case for all Michigan universities.

After I drop off the contract, my sister Sandra and I grab lunch at a local restaurant. It is a popular spot, but we arrive between lunch and dinner times, so we don’t have to wait. I like this spot because they play music from my teen years—Motown jams, as well as the funk that follows in the 70’s and 80’s. I strike up a conversation with a couple of middle-aged white dudes about the low turnout for the recent Michigan Primary Election. I ask if they think the virus scared off voters, and the more outgoing guy says,

“Nah. There wasn’t any enthusiasm for the candidates. It’s not like before when Obama was running. He gave you something worth caring about in an election.” I wonder if he says this because I’m Black, but I still continue the dialogue.

“Yeah, but getting Trump’s dumb ass out of the White House should be motivation enough.” He laughs and agrees, but he is clearly more interested in his Moscow Mule than in national politics. He does promise to vote in November before I graciously make my exit.

March 6, 2020:

I have to go to the grocery store, which I have been dreading. I should have gone when I was in Ann Arbor. Shopping in more affluent communities is easier because the stores are better stocked, and they have more cashiers, so lines are shorter. Anyway, after I gather my items and wait in a check-out lane, I am in ear shot of an older Black woman, whose mask is

hanging off her chin, so her mouth is exposed while she explains to an eager listener that this pandemic is all about Revelations in the *Bible*. She goes on and on about how we all better get right with Jesus before Judgment Day, which is coming real soon, at least according to her.

Then, a brother from another mother, who's standing in line behind me, starts preaching about how we all got these European names.

"But we need to get some African names that are in tune with our true heritage." I think he meant "attuned," but he's not one of my students and probably doesn't give a shit about the vocabulary of the colonizers, says my inner voice talking to myself. He would probably retort that it's about the music in the words anyway.

I keep wishing the clerk would hurry up, and stop being so damn chatty with each and every customer. I suppose it makes the drudgery of her job less boring, but I want to get home to start cooking dinner, and to escape the rantings of this holy roller and a born-again-African.

March 12, 2020:

Now that Spring Break has been extended, I feel like I can catch my breath. But, of course everybody is trying to figure out how to transition to online teaching when you've already taught half the course under conventional circumstances. In addition to that confusion, the city is freaking out because the prediction is that Detroit will be the next hotspot for the pandemic. It never fails that Detroit will be called a "hot spot" because Black people and hotspots seem to proliferate in American rhetorical discourse. In this case, the rationale is that African Americans have preconditions like diabetes and high blood pressure, and since Detroit is 80% Black, we're hot. But what they don't talk about is the high instances of asthma because the poorer neighborhoods breathe the worse air. It came out about six months ago that the air in zip code 48217 is one of the most polluted in the country. I grew up on the edges of that zip code, only further away from the neighborhoods in close proximity to the Ford Foundry and a petroleum processing plant. When I was a baby, I had bronchitis, which in hindsight, I believe it was related to the air pollution. The Rouge River separates my previous neighborhood from the older and poorer parts of the city. So, most of the time the air I breathed as a child was a bit clearer and cleaner.

They talk about the poverty of this predominantly Black city, but they don't talk about the need for universal health care. The citizens are sick because of poor diets, and poor health care. If you don't have health insurance, you only go to the doctor when you are too sick to self-medicate. And then, it's a trip to the emergency room, where they have to take you. And even when you're really fucked up, you are still the last to be transferred to a patient room because they know you won't be able to pay the outrageous bill. My cousin, Dr. Julius Combs, has a lot to say about this.

March 25, 2020:

It is the birthday of my first born grandson, John Percy Boyd IV. We call him "IV" (pronounced I-Vee) for biographical distinction. He turned 11 today, and he lives near Charlotte, NC. The original plan was to visit him for the occasion, but of course that plan crashed when this pandemic parked the jets and commandeered the air space.

The day IV was born, I was in Bremen, Germany, at a dinner party celebrating the birthday of my friend, Uschi Bauer. I got the phone call from my son, John, while we were sharing stories over Calvados, a wonderful Spanish liquor that is akin to cognac, but a bit smoother. When I got the call and exclaimed the news, the toasts shifted from Uschi to me, with everyone calling me "Oma," which is German for grandma. I thought it was a pretty cool tag, so I claimed it, and now all my grands call me that. Uschi added that she will be the German godmother because she and IV share the same birthday. Before I returned to the States, she bought him a pair of moccasins.

I'm telephoning Uschi, hoping that today she might answer the phone, which under the circumstances is the only connection to my friend. The disconnect is cancer. She was diagnosed over a year ago, but I did not find out until six months later, when she exclaimed that a visit was not realistic because she was too ill to receive guests. Her condition is terminal.

She is in Bremen, and likewise, the outer limits. She no longer answers emails because the chemotherapy weakens her focus and fortitude. Sometimes she does answer. But today, the phone rings and rings until an automatic voice tells me to "*Anrufen spater,*" (call back later) and that response is as hollow as this global shutdown.

I met Uschi Bauer when I was a Fulbright professor at the University of Bremen in 1983-4, during the Peace Movement. She once told me that at a protest at the Hamburg Harbor against the deployment of Pershing II Missiles by the United States, the police attacked them with German Shepherds and fierce blasts from firehoses that knocked down the protesters and left large, blue bruises on her thighs and legs.

Even if I could make plans to visit Uschi before the inevitable, there are no international flights because the borders are sealed.

March 28, 2020:

I still cannot reach Uschi by phone, and have concluded that she must be in hospice. So, I decide to check my email in case one of her colleagues or friends has sent a communication. I search my email, but besides superfluous junk mail, mundane pleas or confused inquiries from students, there is no notice.

March 29, 2020:

An email from Anne Meinken, a close friend and colleague of Ushchi, appears. It conveys the tragic, anticipated explanation for the extended silence:

Sun 3/29/2020 7:47 AM

Dear Melba,

This is Anne, I Hope you remember me. I wanted to let you know that sadly Uschi passed away this morning. She had been in hospital for a week and really didn't want to live like that any longer so it is a great relief that she didn't have to suffer for too long. She had been fighting for a year, it is alright now. She told me that you spoke not long ago and that you told her everything would be alright. That gave her strength and hope and she said she believed it, too.

Even though this is sad news, I do hope you and your family are well and will get through Corona fine.

Best wishes,
Anne

I push away from the computer to compose myself. Then, I hear my cell phone rumbling from a text message from Alex, another lifelong friend. We lived in the same neighborhood, graduated from Pershing High School in 1967, and then from Western Michigan University in 1971. Alex is an attorney, and never sends superfluous texts; this is about another ending:

“Julius is not doing well, if you haven't, you may want to give Alice a call.” Alex knows my cousin Julius from the golf course, where serious male bonding takes place. I call my cousin, Alice. They are in Sarasota, Florida, at their winter home. She answers and tells me that,

“Julius is in decline, and he will not recover.”

I maintain my composure because her emotional despair is unimaginable. She is losing her husband of 62 years. When they married, I was only 8 years old. I don't remember a time that Julius was not in the family. Dr. Julius Combs is a physician, and his demise conveys strange, symbolic impact during this pandemic. His amazing contributions to health care for Detroit's Black community are legendary. In one of the last conversations we had, he said that: “Until profit is taken out of the health care system, it will never be right.”

This truth often reverberates in my thoughts, especially since this pandemic panic hit the city. Just like Uschi, Julius is a part of the fabric of my life. He is leaving this world, and I cannot see him, nor can I comfort Alice in person, because the pandemic lockdown severs personal contact or communions.

After I hang up the phone, I sit near the living room window in full view of the vacant street, and weep by myself.

March 30, 2020:

The governor of Michigan orders everyone to stay home, and even before her directive, the university presidents, throughout the state, had already suspended on-campus activities. Adjusting courses accordingly is rather difficult, especially for an old school professor like me. All systems have shifted to the domain of the Internet, and I can't reenter my campus office. Damn it, I should have taken more books home.

April 1, 2020:

I hate this shutdown. I know it is for the best, but I am as stir crazy as my 3-year-old grandson, Maverick, who stares out the window and whines because he wants to escape the house. My daughter answers his complaint and dresses him in a jacket. He runs around in circles with delight, and insists that I go with them. It is not against the rules to go outside, as long as one adheres to the 6 feet distancing rule. He climbs into his red wagon that my daughter and I take turns pulling. It is sunny outside, and as we exhale and exercise our legs, we speak to neighbors, who likewise emerge to salvage sanity, to reassure themselves that the world still exists beyond the television screen, and that despite the terror of knowing tRump (Trump) is still the president, perhaps we will survive his demented derriere.

Detroit is a city of neighborhoods. Downtown skyscrapers, the Cultural Center and spaces of and near Wayne State University are defined by tall buildings, intensifying the proximity of populations. But here, children are playing in their backyards, and bicyclers peddle down streets, as we saunter down the sidewalk. We turn a corner and see a father across the street with his two elementary-age children. He is entertaining them with a remote-control toy car, zipping swiftly along a quiet street. We wave, and the toy crosses the avenue, and stops next to the red wagon. Maverick, says, "Hi car." I realize that viewing animated children films has led him to believe that this toy car is a living thing, and it can actually hear his greeting.

We wave at the smiling father, and yell, "Thanks," as we continue walking through Rosedale Park, a historic neighborhood, known for its diverse architecture and century-old Oak trees that shade our homes in summer. For some strange reason, evidence of this longevity is reassuring, especially when I see a robin and a cardinal nesting in my backyard in anticipation of new life.

I left my phone at home because I am fatigued by the endless group texts, posturing as socializing. But when I return, I succumb to habit and retrieve the messages. Alex sent another notice. "Julius is gone."

I call to speak to Alice, but a caregiver answers the phone. She takes my name, and I disconnect, and phone my cousins in Los Angeles, Jennifer and her father, Charles, who is also a physician, to report the sad news, and to secure some semblance of comfort in their voices.

My cousin Jennifer answers the phone and comments that today is Great Uncle Theodore's birthday. I had not realized that. My birthday is tomorrow, and I was relieved that Julius did not die on that date, which is a selfish thought. But when death dates and birth dates coincide, celebratory activities are undermined by these parallels; subversive reminders of life's inevitable ending.

April 2, 2020

What a shit time for a birthday, especially the big 70. I can't celebrate my survival and resolve my grief simultaneously. I had big plans for this milestone, and being stuck in the house was not it. Even Sandy, my sister who lives in Detroit, isn't coming. She so afraid of the Coronavirus that she has not left her apartment in weeks, not even for groceries. Her son, Stanley, has to do the grocery shopping and deliveries for her. She stares at an expansive view of the Detroit River and the skyline of Windsor, Ontario, and then looks at the city streets, wondering in disbelief why so many people are outside instead of on lockdown. This is what she tells me when she telephones during breaks from binge watching episodes of *Game of Thrones*. I don't think there was a pandemic in The Seven Kingdoms, though you could get that Gray Scales disease that covers your skin and eventually drives you crazy before you die. But I don't mention that cause it would be mean to undermine her escape from reality.

My daughter is determined to make my birthday special. My grandson has painted a picture for me that Maya has framed. This abstract painting is really impressive. Maya's good at producing events. She has ordered dinner from Ryan Salter, who is one of her close friends, and has adopted me as his "Detroit Godmother." He is a brilliant computer technician, who left his "good paying job" at the Fiat Chrysler Corporation to pursue his passion as a chef, and to start his own catering business. Maya tells me to dress up, but I ain't feelin' it. Jeans and a "cute top" is the best I can offer under the circumstances.

So, the party is Maya, Maverick, James (my spouse) and Ryan (who we social distance from us). We got champagne, Sauvignon Blanc, mango chicken, wild rice, collard greens and more wine. Needless to say, I was sauced before dinner time. The ancestors graced us with warm weather, so we chill outside. Stan, my nephew, drops by.

“Of course, I came by to holla at you, Auntie Melba. Corona ain’t goin’ stop me from hugging you on this day.” Social distancing was short-changed in that moment. Besides, we had been on lockdown for a month, and no symptoms surfaced in anyone in the family because James had supplied everyone with masks and blue, plastic gloves for encounters with the outside world. So, we take a leap of faith, and Stan and I embrace.

April 7, 2020:

I can’t watch the news any more. I read the newspapers, so I don’t have to listen to the excitement in the voices of broadcasters, because the pandemic has generated increased attention from audiences. Although they posture in language and gestures of concern, they love that the public tunes in to watch them, to acquire some answers. They never do. And then, dumb-ass tRump postures in another news conference, conveying fake news, full of contradictions, misinformation and nonsense. I shut down and read poetry until 11:35 pm when Stephen Colbert makes me laugh at tRump and media madness, and so I won’t get a headache thinking about this failure of leadership and his fiasco.

But thank God for artists. Saffell Gardner sent us a small painting through the mail. It is a wonderful, colorful abstraction that fit perfectly in the letter-size envelope. The inscription on the back says: “Melba/James, Keep your spirits up.” I smile every time I look at it, prominently displayed in my dining room.

April 13, 2020:

Today is my father’s birthday. John Percy Boyd, Sr. died on August 5, 1996, which is the birthday of my maternal grandmother, Sarah Wynn. I send texts to the family to take notice. Dudley Randall, the great Detroit poet and publisher, who was my mentor, died on the same death date as my father four years later in 2000. It so strange how dates converge in patterns. I wonder what previous generations would say about such numerology? Randall was born in 1914, before the Spanish Flu Pandemic, but he would have no personal memory of it.

When I call to check on Naomi Long Madgett, who is 96, she says she has never experienced anything like it. I wish I wouldn’t have any memory of Corvid 19.

April 14, 2020:

Today is my oldest grandson’s birthday. Kyler is a bonus, who became a part of the family when my son married his mother, Ashley. I call to wish him “Happy Birthday.” He is 15 today, and I comment on the deepening bass in his voice.

“In 3 years, you will legally be an adult,” I said.

“I can’t wait until I’m old enough to drink.” I start laughing.

“Yes, you can,” I retort.

Since this pandemic lockdown started, I am drinking more alcohol than usual. I wonder if it’s depression drinking. I am still working, so it’s not as if I don’t have anything to do. But at 5

pm, the universal happy hour, I reach for a glass of wine or prepare a vodka tonic with a slice of lime.

In a phone conversation with my friend, Marion, who's a jazz musician and also a university professor, she also admits to drinking more, but not really getting that high. I concur. I wonder, if anxiety is consuming the alcohol before reaches the pleasure centers of the brain? Damn. You can't even get high during this pandemic.

April 15, 2020:

Why are so many of my dear friends leaving the planet during this time? Evans Young was someone I met in 1990 at the Center for Afroamerican Studies (CAAS) when Robert Chrisman (one of the founding editors of *The Black Scholar*) and Prof. Laurence Goldstein were planning a commemorative celebration for Robert Hayden, Detroit poet and labor activist, who was an alumnus and taught at the University of Michigan from 1970 until his death in 1980.

At the time, Robert was writing his dissertation on Hayden's early writings for his PhD in English, and was an instructor for the center. I was the director of African American Studies at the University of Michigan, Flint and documented the event and conducted video interviews with the guest speakers.

Evans was the assistant director of the center. He was a kind, unassuming person, who was dedicated to the success of CAAS. His competence made our task so much easier. Naomi Long Madgett, Dudley Randall and Gwendolyn Brooks read poetry. Detroit activist, Chris Alston, recalled his labor organizing experiences with Hayden, and panels discussed his literary legacy. Literary critic, Darwin T. Turner, gave the keynote address. It was a mammoth undertaking, and Evans was the quiet, competent magic in the mix.

The following year, Evans asked if I would be willing to teach the Black film course for the center during spring term. I have taught this course every spring hence. I was not a distant adjunct, and Evans kept me involved with programs and activities on the Ann Arbor campus and as a featured reader at the first Ann Arbor Book Festival in 2004 when my biography on Dudley Randall was published.

Evans was an Asian American, who embraced the broader struggle for equity for all ethnic minorities, especially the students who came to U of Michigan. He told me once, that despite the gains in diversity affairs, "There are still challenges for our students." He was a reserved but diligent soldier in the fight for equality and decency.

I did not know that Evans had cancer. The last time I saw him was in October, at a planning meeting comprised of UM alumni for the 50th Anniversary of Afroamerican Studies. He was reserved, but that was always his style, but he did not look ill. As we were brainstorming about ideas for the celebration, Evans said,

"We should have audio stations throughout campus with recordings of our poets, like Melba, reading their poetry as students circulate." Evans was usually the first one to comment about artistic expression as an important aspect of Black presence at the university. I smiled, and thanked him for thinking of this and me, and added inclusion of the voices of Robert Hayden, Dudley Randall, Al Young, Gloria House (who was also in attendance at the meeting) as well as other poets who studied and evolved in this space.

When I got the email, announcing Evans passing, I was shocked, and tears conjoined an endless stream of grief. I would miss him so much. He was critical to the sensibility of the

university for me. We would sometimes have lunch, not necessarily for work-related reasons, but to relax and enjoy time and space. When he took a promotion as an associate dean, I was happy for him, but missed his presence in the center.

Evans and I are products of the 1960's, and so we always embraced when we greeted. But, because I arrived late for the meeting and was rushing back to Detroit when we adjourned, I missed the hug. During this Coronavirus pandemic, the absence of touching has intensified the isolation, and those lost during this bizarre period feels even more painful because you can't relieve the grief by embracing the living, who are also suffering this loss. The physical act of touching acknowledges life in the present, in your own being. I will miss that part of me sharing life with Evans, with Ushchi, and with Julius.

April 18, 2020:

I have been calling as many of my friends since this pandemic struck the U.S. There is no list per se, but in isolation, I think of someone else to "holla at." Yesterday it was my college roommate, Eraina, who lives in Flint and was the named citizen in the lawsuit against the previous, Republican governor, Snyder, who is responsible for contaminated water in Flint.

"Rain" tells me her daughter, Alex, is recovering from the Coronavirus. Alex is an attorney and works for an equal justice organization. She contracted the virus while visiting the juvenile detention center in Detroit. The overcrowding of jails are breeding grounds for Covid 19, where the occupants are overwhelming Black or Latino. The last word on this was Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, ordering the early release of inmates eligible for parole.

Today, I also decided to call Tony Medina. He's in Washington D.C., so I know he's got some new stories, and even during this disastrous time, he has a personality that lifts my spirits. We mainly talk about our frustrations as professors. What do we do about students who have disappeared? He is worried that maybe they are ill, or maybe they don't have Internet access. These speculations are real possibilities for Black students. He teaches at Howard University, and I teach African American Studies at Wayne State University, so we are well aware that many of our students don't have certain resources at their disposal to complete the course virtually.

But besides our worries, we cracks jokes about tRump and reminisce about poetry readings in Paris, New York, Detroit, and D.C. We promise to stay in touch and to for-real touch when this pandemic is over.

April 19, 2020:

It's Sunday, which means spending most of the day perusing the *Detroit Free Press* and *The New York Times*. Of course, there is more discussion about the pandemic, which seems even more remote while sequestered at home, but suddenly in the Metro section this article, "Independent grocery stores throw Detroiters 'a lifeline,'" disrupts detached reading because it begins with :

"Sandi Ware is 70 and staying home because of the coronavirus, even when it comes to grocery shopping," (Susan Salasky, *Detroit Free Press*, p. 4A, December 19, 2020). The article continues with a discussion about delivery and pick-up services provided by a downtown grocery store.

Sandi Ware has been my best friend since high school. (Her last name was Overstreet then, which is the name I still use because she has had two married names.) She is my children's godmother, and I am her daughter's godmother. That's how tight we are. Throughout this pandemic we have telephoned, and she sends me a ton of texts, containing links to jokes about tRump's incompetence and proclivity for telling lies. But, she never mentioned that she was interviewed for the newspaper.

"You didn't tell me you were interviewed for the *Free Press*," I said.

"Girl, I forgot all about that."

"Well, are you getting a lot of calls about this"? She laughs.

"You know niggas don't read." But since I am one of the "niggas" that does, I was the first to holla at her about it.

"Have you seen it?"

"I read it online."

"Well, we've got a hard copy. I'll save it for you."

Adjacent to this article, a title catches my eye, "With 2,308 dead, Mich. Stay-at-home critics file more suits." Now, this article explains motivations behind lawsuits against the Governor, such as: not being able to visit a girlfriend (I guess this guy is tired of masturbating); not being able to shop at gun stores; and not being able to party on their boats on the lakes. Now, a few are about more serious consequences, like the owner of a lawn care service having to lay off his 15 employees, but to complain about restrictions on your sex life, or not having access to weapons and ammunition (to threaten government officials), or not being able to hang out on the lake in April are far too frivolous to raise in a court of law. However, this might explain why advertisements by law firms proliferate on late night television. It seems like Americans are getting dumber and dumber-er.

April 24, 2020:

So, about a week ago there was a protest rally against the ordered shut down in front of the residence of Gov. Whitmer's home in Lansing, the state capital. These idiots drove to Lansing to create a grid lock, which was really ridiculous because no one is going anywhere anyway. They wore Trump hats and waved American, Confederate and Nazi flags like the state of Michigan is in the South or in Germany during the 1930's. In fact, it entered the nation as a "free state" in 1837, but the influx of Ku Klux Klan members during the Great Migration in the 20th Century has infected the consciousness of certain regions. Regarding the Nazi flags, my father is turning over in his grave, since he fought in WWII in a battalion that liberated P.O.W. camps. The tRumpites complain that their freedom and their "rights" are being violated by the governor's order. One woman told a television news reporter that she needed to go to the hair dresser. I admit, her hair was a mess, but it would take more expertise found at a beauty shop to improve her style. Perhaps, a lobotomy to eradicate her brain.

To make matters work, tRump congratulated the protestors on the news for protecting their 2nd Amendment Rights. There was nothing in the governor's order that had to do with their goddamn guns. Although, I wish there was some way that intelligence was also a requirement in the background check to purchase a lethal weapon, and even more so, to buy bullets. Even more so, like the need to end the Electoral College, the Second Amendment should be deleted. Deer hunters can buy their meat at the grocery store, like the rest of us.

April 25, 2020:

Today is Maverick Blaine Clore Gill's birthday. He is 3 years old, and he is the youngest of my four grandsons. His mother got treats and decorated the backyard in a carnival theme. He had a great time despite not having any children to celebrate with, except me in my regressive, juvenile state. His joy makes us smile. Like generations in my family before him, he is a natural engineer. Not satisfied to simply play with toys the way they were designed, but rather, he reconstructs what, where and how they work by changing tracks and bridges, or finding new routes for his toy car to travel, along a window sill or between two tree limbs. A fresh imagination is a wonderful thing to behold and gives us hope. Unfortunately, his father, Rodney, is stuck in New York, and face time on the phone is just not getting it. Bummer.

April 27, 2020:

I was invisible during a poetry reading M.L. Leibler organized, "The Living Room Series," which occurred on Zoom. I read with two other poets, Gerry Lafemina and Joy Gaines. Now, that was a cool idea because all my other Zoom meetings have been academic conversations. I always join these without video because I don't want to take off my pajamas or comb my hair. So, only my name appears in a black box (the story of my life). But, for the poetry reading, I was going to be full face, and even put on something other than a tee shirt, at least dress up the top half of my body.

But I be damned, when I turned in, I wasn't given a choice to add video. I tried to fix it, as the participants yelled instructions about what icons to press, but the response was always "go to settings," but settings wanted a code I did not have or could not remember. Anyway, I finally told them that they could look at each other or close their eyes while I read.

It was cool, though. I read a set of poems about the artist, Romare Bearden, who was commissioned to do a mural for the Detroit Institute of Arts to commemorate the museum's centennial. The imagery interacted with his art and interfaced with his experiences hanging out with Detroiters. I was supposed to read them at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta for a special exhibition of Bearden's art, but was unable to attend the event on January 3, 2020.

I hate technology, and I think my computer knows this.

April 28, 2020:

I got a text from my cousin Peter, saying his mother was in the hospital, but not for Corona. I call Sarah, and she explains that she fell and injured her appendix. They will have to operate. Of course, the hospital does not allow any visitors because of the pandemic, so she's is alone. I crack a few jokes, so she'll laugh. She promises to keep me posted.

Yet, another impediment. You can't visit your friends and relatives when they are infirmed. I think about Al Young, who can't receive visitors. Since his stroke about a year ago, I have not been able to talk to him. I planned to visit the Bay Area in California, but didn't get there before the pandemic. When Ishmael Reed sent me an email to do the journal, I asked about Al, and of course, Ishmael has not seen him since the sheltering restrictions were implemented. Just before Al had a stroke, plans were made to honor him at the Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit. Al grew up in Detroit, and he has given many readings in the city over the years, but this would be something special. It has been over a year

since he fell ill, and I miss his voice and our regular conversations, sharing stories, poems and incidental comments and random thoughts.

I call my cousin Sarah again. I rarely pray because my life is relatively good compared to most others, so I don't think should bother God with any selfish appeals, but tonight I ask for healing for Sarah.

April 29, 2020:

My cousin called to tell me she was released from the hospital, and there would be no surgery! Thank God!

April 30, 2020:

Today's news reported more demonstrators at the Michigan State Capital, but this time they tried to break into the chambers of the state legislators. The Michigan State Police restrained them. Since we're talking about enraged white people, nobody gets shot. Perhaps a couple of whacks across the head, if that.

The best response to all this madness appeared in *Saturday Night Live* satirical skit with Cicely Strong as Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer responding to demonstrators. It didn't make the cut for the show, but it's gone viral on YouTube, at least in Detroit. Instead of paraphrasing, I thought it would be better for those interested to click on the link to check it out:

<https://youtu.be/gqPCJfKULgs>

May 1, 2020:

Madness begets madness, and which is what happens when the mentality of fascist protestors spreads, like a virus.

On May 1, a customer was refused entry into the Family Dollar Store in Flint, Michigan, because she was not wearing a mask. She left the store, and complained to her husband that she had been "disrespected." Consequently: "Three family members have been charged in the killing of a security guard who told a customer at a Michigan Family Dollar store to wear a state-mandated face mask, officials said on Monday. Calvin Munerlyn, 43, died at a Flint hospital after he was shot in the head Friday, said Michigan State Police Lt. David Kaiser. Ramonyea Travon Bishop, 23, Larry Edward Teague, 44, and Sharmel Lashe Teague, 45, have been charged with first-degree premeditated murder, along with other charges, the Genesee County Prosecutor's Office said in a statement on Monday," CNN reported.

"Disrespected" is a hood misconception that is as ill as those who claim to experience it. "Disrespected" has been the reason for many shooting deaths in the Black community in Detroit. When you don't know what "respect" is, you are always being "dissed." Listen to the Staple Sisters sing these insightful lyrics by Sir Mack Rice:

"If you don't respect yourself,
Ain't nobody gonna give a hoot."

So, figure that shit out, Sharmel, while trapped inside a jail cell, that's probably rampant with the coronavirus because of disrespectful overcrowding, and you won't have to wear a mask and no social distancing happening in a real lockdown for killing another person, who was a father, a husband and a worker doing his job, which was to protect you and others shopping in the cheapest store ever imagined. This was more than an act of disrespect. You instigated a senseless murder, an evil act that your loved ones committed because you don't understand the meaning of respect.

May 3, 2020:

It's Sunday, so it's newspaper day in this house. Interestingly, an article appears in the Entertainment section of the *Detroit Free Press* about an upcoming episode on the television program "All Rise," intersecting with the subject of the Coronavirus and the virtual workplace. I have watched some clever, and not so clever, episodes produced from the homes of the late night television hosts. But this will be the first attempt on a prime time program. The star of the show, Simone Missick, plays Judge Lola Carmichael. The article reports that she is a native Detroiter, who graduated from Detroit Renaissance High School, which is the high school my youngest sister, Dotty, my brother, Siegel, and my nephew, Stanley attended. It is a magnet school, and you've got to be exceptionally bright to be admitted. Simone Missick is also a Howard University graduate.

The funny thing is I initially continued viewing this program because I intuitively related to her sophisticated sassiness. Learning she is from the "D" answered my impression of her familiar demeanor.

While some of the scripts are predictable, most of the actors, especially the women, are interesting and unconventional relative to commercial television programming. Moreover, I love that her name is "Lola Carmichael" (one of the best friends growing up was Eunice Carmichael) and that she follows her career aspirations and accomplishments despite the geographical distance between Los Angeles and Washington DC, where her husband pursues his career.

I also follow this series because Judge Lola Carmichael comes from an activist family, which is emphasized in tense scenes between Lola and her mother, who is a radical social worker engaged in social justice issues on the ground. Lola is likewise critical of the judicial system, and her unconventional courtroom practices are sometimes controversial and jeopardize her judicial status.

May 4, 2020:

The Covid-19 episode on "All Rise" appears in the Zoom format with all the characters seen in their respective squares on the screen. The storyline is that two brothers had a fight, and one of them took the car that they jointly own. So, the brother, who paid for the vehicle called the police, and the other brother is arrested. This doesn't sound like a credible scenario, since both names appear on the title of the vehicle, but in any case, the larger issue is that there is a concern for the rapid spread of the coronavirus in the jail, which is certainly a current topic in large cities, like Los Angeles, which is the setting of the series. (In a related and current

topic, there is an uproar in Michigan by Republicans because Gov. Whitmer is ordering the early release of inmates eligible for parole.)

In the beginning of the episode, the main characters have a casual meeting via Zoom. They are casually dressed, and Lola wears a Howard University sweatshirt. When her mother Zooms in, the name Mama Roxy appears on the bottom of the screen. She explains that she is delivering food to those in need, and Lola scolds her, reminding her mother that she is in a “vulnerable category” for the virus.

Other interesting aspect of this episode is that it demonstrates how a virtual trial can take place on Zoom. As is her style, Judge Lola directly addresses the brother, who filed the complaint that resulted in the arrest, reminding him what brothers share and the significance of that relationship. He withdraws his complaint and the trial ends with the release of the prisoner after he has been tested for the virus. The other twist to the story is that the prisoner’s girlfriend is expecting a baby, and he is able to be present at the birth.

The episode ends with a virtual party with the regular stars of the show, dancing in their respective sequestering spaces to Stevie Wonder’s “I’ll Be Loving You Always.” Now, that’s a straight-up Detroit intervention. I start bobbing my head, and then kicking it with a few happy steps while singing with Stevie, who grew up in the neighborhood.

May 8, 2020:

Today is my daughter’s birthday, and it’s fucking snowing outside. I mean, sometimes it snows in April in Detroit, but never in May. She is so upset that she sends out a group text expressing her outrage. It’s pretty messed up though. I mean some serious flakes are coming down, collecting into a white mass covering the grass! On the other hand, it reiterates Maya’s view that climate change or global warming, whatever you prefer to call it, is connected to the coronavirus and the imbalance of the planet.

But she stills has her Zoom birthday party, and family and friends hook up virtually to toast her, and she’s got some really expensive champagne that her Aunt Dotty and Uncle Terry sent from Alpharetta, Georgia. Maya is an artist and a clothing designer, so she wears an original outfit that she finished today. There are 25 people at this party, including the Falconers, our Canadian neighbors, Nancy and Caroline Falconer. Everyone is talking at the same time, and I can only understand Amber, Maya’s best friend, who is the host for the Zoom party. Something had to happen because it’s the big 40. But when it gets to “Truth or Dare,” Maya says:

“Hold up. My parents have to leave before we start playing that game.” So, James and I exit cause we don’t want to hear all of their embarrassing or outrageous personal experiences during and since college.

May 12, 2020:

Today I received a group email from scholar and activist, Gregory Hicks. His appeal was to bring the Detroit community together in response to the erroneous response of city government to the coronavirus crisis. His statement is too long to include in its entirety, but the opening is moving and on point:

“Push Back! We are in Jeopardy! The Detroit City Council should adhere to the best in democratic values, leadership, and oversight practices even in difficult times like today. The unanimous vote by the Detroit City Council on the Mayor's recent budget adjustment plan in response to the current Covid-19 health crisis, is in fact a shortsighted reorganization plan. The plan is a budgetary road map re-prioritizing city government under the claim to battle the Covid-19 health crisis. The plan builds on reducing ‘non-essential’ governmental functions, prioritizing policing, and a limited role for public health officials all while the city is completely subservient to the private sector.

“In cases of public health, it is important that the public sector, especially leaders from within the public health profession take a commanding lead. The current call to contain Covid-19 is constrained in its recognition of the special needs of homeless people, chronically unemployed workers, developmentally disabled people, mentally impaired citizens, and defenseless and impoverished children. The result is Blacks are 14% of Michigan’s population, but is burdened with 40% of the impact of Covid-19.”

Elise Mitchell’s research extends Hicks’ analysis of the pandemic in an article that appeared in *The Atlantic*, “The Shortages May Be Worse than the Disease,” March 11, 2020 considers historical parallels and repetition with regards to epidemics:

“And yet these dynamics—far from being unique to the current epidemic—have recurred time and again for at least half a millennium. As a historian of slavery and medicine, I often come across bleak accounts of smallpox outbreaks that happened 200 to 500 years ago. Then as now, the poorest and least powerful people were usually at the greatest risk of infection—and the public-health measures of the time either neglected these people or actively harmed them. This treatment frequently enabled otherwise containable disease outbreaks to spread.”

I really don’t want to believe the current pandemic is a conspiracy to eliminate certain populations, but it appears that such callous actions by governments indicate an effort to capitalize on these conditions leads me to the same conclusion. Most politicians don’t give a damn about people of color or the poor. In Detroit, that is more often than not, the same folks. Let’s be clear, very unethical and illegal activities occurred during the 2016 Presidential Election in Detroit. Many ballots disappeared. In modern history, the majority of Michigan voters never voted for a Republican candidate for President. If you repress the Detroit vote, you can change the outcome of an election because Black people in this city don’t vote Republican. tRump is threatening to withhold Pandemic Relief from Michigan, if applications for absentee ballots are sent out. Moreover, local politicians seem to be more interested in gentrification than in servicing their constituency that has suffered during the State Emergency takeover because of the bankruptcy that drastically undermined city services, from education to garbage pick-up. The conspiracy is the policy.

March 20, 2020:

This morning James had to take his father for a doctor’s appointment. I am in the house alone, and I realize that I miss the total quiet without anyone in the house. The strange thing about the sheltering in place is that there is always someone around. You are in isolation, but never alone. I need this, to have time with myself by myself. I miss me.

March 25, 2020:

It's Memorial Day, and it's going to be hot. So, people will be swarming and barbequing in their backyard, and exploding fire-works. This is the weekend that I'm usually in Tobermory, Ontario, opening the family cottage for the summer. Tobermory is a small village on the tip of the Bruce Peninsula, which is Canadian land on the eastern side of Lake Huron. There have been no cases of Covid-19 there. Our place sits in a unique space on the strait that connects Lake Huron to the Georgian Bay. I should be chillin' on the deck editing this journal. Instead, I'm stuck in Detroit on the wrong side of the border, writing poetry to stay sane.

"Uncertainty"

Past to future
imperfect.
what was
is what if
will still
be a
mystery.