

WHO WE REALLY ARE

It's a shedding of skin: sixty days of sheltering
in place, painstakingly avoiding
infection, trying our best to protect
ourselves, to flatten the curve. In a way,
this is the perfect revelation of what
lies beneath, the uncovering at long last of
our public faces.

By week two, I was going without
lipstick, a bra, the daily plucking
from my chinny chin chin, new wiry gray
hairs overpowering the original black ones, colonizing
my body not as a map of nations, but a topography
of time's passage. I'm aging unceremoniously. Without
the enhancements and concealments, our true selves break
out, in search of light and love, wanting
to be free.

You've heard this before: the magic number is
twenty-one days, three weeks to learn a new
habit, break an old one. Enough time
has passed to do both. We haven't tried at all

to save anybody. There is no going back to work,
no makeup needed for this black eye. School is closed.
No one will notice, hear whispers about fresh bruises
hidden by long sleeves. Don't pretend you didn't
know how frequently this happens. In quarantine,
but also in better times. We should have tried.
Our outrage should have been faster, more contagious
than the virus. In this country, such a disease
is not the only arbiter of premature death.
Silence is too.

White men hide their fear with weapons and words
they turn into law, slippery in its double-edge. The wounds
of "justice," fatal to me, are only superficial
to them. How clearly that Lady with the blindfold
and scales sees color. There are white men
who'll kill me while I am jogging, standing,
sitting or sleeping. Just slaughter me
in the street, like an animal being put out
of its misery, because dying alone in a hospital is not cruel enough,
there is still dignity, the divine presence of spirit even
in being intubated, ventilated, the body ravaged
by an illness that has no cure. It is the naked suffering,
the savage humiliation those white men need

from black and brown bodies, because hate is
a human emotion, a leviathan on dry land, angry
that love eludes him. Love, that most vital energy which
the soulless crave.

I've come to understand, there is no normal awaiting
our return. That was part of a ruse. It has always been
pretend, an optical illusion, this idea of normal. We see
what is designed for us to see. And we smile
because it's beautiful. That's the criteria for winning.

It was back then, at least, before this
plague: beauty for its own sake.

We all knew.

Politicians methodically position citizens
like dominoes. We all fall down. We are only numbers
on a spreadsheet to them. Until we are voters marking ballots.
Are you their kind? A man in a red cap. A woman in
a short skirt. Shame. Always their Sunday best. Open-carrying
bibles and AR15s. Piety is a prerequisite for redemption.
Jesus loves that.

What are we becoming?, my friend
wants to know. Through my phone,

her voice sounds desperate, uncertain. A child
near flames, fingers outstretched, all nerve
endings raw, pain receptors primed. Curiosity edges us
forward, yet we always turn our heads
at the moment of injury, refuse
to see. *Why do we never choose to look?*, I respond.
Why don't we see? Behind closed doors, we are living in a violence
whose scars are more permanent than any
we've known. You can't erase what you won't name. The truth
of our inequities, our proclivities, our perversions have risen
to the surface. Will we see the whole, the all, for what it is
and say, to ourselves, to each other: *This is me. This is you.*
We can no longer deny who
we really are.

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