

# contagion: quartet

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“This world is the closed door. It is a barrier.  
And at the same time it is the way through.”  
—Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

*COVID-19—days of the locked body*

THE CONTAGION KNOWS no language but the body. Speaking roughly in manifestations, it accosts the breath, makes intimate with the lungs. Mind the orifices of your face. Refrain from touch. Mind the safe distances. Water and soap and alcohol: we make rituals of our bathings and, look closely, my hands are subaquatic, drunken things, blooming with rashes and scales at the tender skin of the wrists. Mind the alchemy of detergents. Keep your ointments close.

The building where I live has taken on the air of an abandoned hospital, with tiled floors and mint green walls. The doors rarely open and close. It is an antiseptic quiet, especially at night. Quarantine keeps us in, and curfew. We are contained where we sleep. But I hear motorcycle engines outside my window. They are below the mango trees. I hear the house cats scramble, chasing insects in the half-light of the corridors.

But *I* must have language, and so retreat to my dictionaries, graphite-smudged at the spine. There is an odd comfort to be found in lists. I think: *cloister*, which derives from the Latin word *claustrum*, meaning “bar” or “bolt.” From *claudere*, meaning “to close.” The shape of the word feels like a smooth pebble, melodic, cool to the touch—scrubbed immaculate to the deeper grains and capillary hollows.

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As we seal an inside from an outside, we draw nearer to a warm pulse. It is summer, the dry season. But rain will come. Wind brushes the empty sidewalks, and the brittle shells that are fallen leaves, their edges curling to center.

*the archipelago*

How to put this? The contagion is ... lonely, needs people. Fails to thrive in solitude. Which is why we must become isolate creatures. The cities and provinces, the countries are locking down. Here, in Manila, I imagine the sound of lockdown as a hydraulic hiss of steam, the clamp of metal and dog cages, a grimace that lasts and lasts.

Quarantined Italians sing from their windows while in Kazakhstan, the whirling tops of surveillance drones hum as they patrol the borders of Nur-Sultan. The American hospitals cry out: *we do not have enough ventilators!* In Rio de Janeiro, the Christ the Redeemer statue has been painted in light: a doctor's coat, blue stethoscope, and the Rod of Asclepius—with its entwined snake—over a towering chest of concrete and soapstone. Needles push through cloth. We sew masks to wear over our mouths and noses. We learn to speak with our eyes.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines archipelago as “an expanse of water with many scattered islands.” In more abstract terms, it is also “a group or scattering of similar things.” An archipelago, therefore—as an expression of physicality—is distance and affinity rendered simultaneous. But we already know this; know the beauty, the ache of strewn parts and vacant sockets.

Between me and my sister is a closed border, though she lives only forty minutes away in the next province, a virus hotbed. I remember her potted plants, her lemon tree, and send a message about the afternoon downpour. How fresh it smelled, and how sudden the fluster of branches. I ask if it reached her village. My sister replies: “Three days of grey skies, but no rain.”

*liturgy and motion*

Transmission: both a thing of movement and a signal. One evening a man from the barangay, one of those deemed a Person Under Investigation because of his history of travel, is brought to the local clinic. They pronounce him dead-on-arrival. It is around 3:30 a.m. on Palm Sunday. At home, the turn in his condition had been swift. How fast it gripped him, how quickly a life can go. Yet this, too, is old knowledge. A thread frays, snaps. There is wisdom in us yet.

The churches that day are silent, as they have been since the lockdown. Interiors dark and slumbering. At the corners of footpaths rise gentle heaps of fire tree petals, still the color of fire. I leave my building to buy water and come upon a worshipper on the side of the road. He stands alone, holding a palm branch near his chest, shaking the leaves the way drowsy babies shake their rattles.

Then, I hear music. Chants like murmurs, like cicada song, swell into the afternoon from loudspeakers strapped to a plodding Toyota hatchback; the drone of engines and “Gloria, Laus et Honor.” There is respite to be found in words we know yet do not know. They must be reached into, and in reaching we press out of our own skins, and stumble through to a broader plane. It can begin like this: *cui puerile decus prompsit* ... and become the crow of a rooster and a dusty procession beneath a canopy of trees strung with telephone wire.

Hatchback. Motorbike. Ambulance. At last, a pickup truck festooned with palm leaves and burgundy drape cloth. In the open cargo bed stands a priest in red vestment and a crisp surgical mask. He raises a wooden cross above his head. He slings blessings across the road. Liturgy as flyby, as parabolic advance through bare space. Like this he balances, eyes darting. White sleeves flap, and catch the light.

*spell relief*

As the easing of pain, an unburdening of the bones. As a means of rupture: monotony broken. Packed earth cracked at the foot of a tree whose roots, plump with time and offerings to the old spirits (rice cake, hardboiled egg, betel nut, white hen—sacrificed), dislodge grains of silt and loam to find surface. They meet a pale wedge of sky, a realm of sounds. Imagine the tree had pulled her knees up so she could rest her chin on them. As a sharpened outline resulting from contrast; a mode of sculpture, of aesthetic gesture.

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Relief package: purified water, dried fish, eggs, mung beans, instant noodles, biscuits, 3-in-1 coffee, canned beef, salt, sugar, cooking oil...*last week I saw an old man riding a child's bicycle. As he pedaled he hunched, lower and lower, a sack of rice carried on his narrow shoulders.*

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My niece says of my grandfather, the painter: “The subjects he painted were his early memories. It’s all rivers, farms, and mountains ...” I think of a boy running alongside rice fields, climbing wet haystacks. The dark body of a carabao set against a blue rise of hills. But the line between us and Lolo’s memories is a war, a cloud of smoke rising from a burning city. I think of a young man who can’t see past his own palms, and so he sinks his face into them. Breathes in the pungent scent of acrylic and mud; tells himself to wait until it passes, like a summer rain. He buries a first wife, and twins—stillborn. The woman’s name is Corazón, the Spanish word for *heart*. He touches the soil, and wonders if something will grow.

How do we emerge from this—how did we ever?

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Every night before sleep, I coat my wrists and knuckles with Vaseline. They have started to blister. I do not know if I wash my hands too much or too little. All I want is to be clean.

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I once read that to escape from quicksand, you must make yourself as light as possible. Remove your coat and slide away your bags in slow, deliberate movements, the way you’d move in a dream. Keep arms and head above the surface. Here is a place of trapped water and muddled earth, of land that forgets what it is. *Float your way out*. Tilt back as if floating in a swimming pool on a clear day. Inch the legs upward, skyward (there is enough solid to hold you, but mind the cage of your chest, imagine it buoyant). Sediment will fill the gaps you once occupied, in the way of a flipped hourglass. Until the body lies flat, expelled at last from the ground.