

## Panoramic

In the beginning, there were no afterschool clubs. There were no missing bills, no publishing agents, no knitting needles. It was too early for asthmatic antique novels, and forget beer pong. You wouldn't find any games of koochie lip, nor were there rapping mechanical bulldogs. After the world saw those things rise to existence, we almost saw their extinction, so how the hell did we make it this far without them?

The middle-aged man stepped out on the front porch, trying to imagine what the world would look like if Covid had its way. He wouldn't be seeing the neighbor's two middle-school children swinging under the big apple tree. He wouldn't be there to see it. His wife would call out, "Back in before you let in the bug; I don't want us breathing death all over on each other." Or rather, she wouldn't be there to warn him. They'd both be in separate coffins, with a solid bedrock between them, so they couldn't so much as tap out in morse code. She'd studied it; she was the veteran. He hadn't. He'd be left to wonder if he'd picked the right religion, or lack thereof. Or his thoughts would scatter into a billion shards, and he wouldn't have the vigilance to board any single one of them.

"Corn, back in here. The ocra ain't frying itself, and I'll only do half the work."

Fried ocra had almost gone away for good. Steamed turnip greens had, too. The indebted college dropout almost had a mental breakdown over the garden she and her boyfriend failed to plant because they were too afraid to go to the supermarket. Now that it was safe to drive there, she could hardly stop trembling. She couldn't guess how many individual pathogens they'd dodged while going out to water the seeds based on instructions she could hardly understand - what to fertilize them with, what soil to plant them in, how much insecticides to use - not that any of them mattered. Neither one of them had the stomach to keep down raw plants, not even fruit. It was back to frozen meals; it was back to their part-time jobs.

Of all the jeopardized entities, the workforce quite possibly held on the tightest. The sturdy old nurse strolled through the waiting room. She could practically feel the vaccine shooting through every last blood vessel with each muscle movement. She might one day evolve herself to do away with breathing; she had so little room for it now with that mask in the way. She didn't spare so much as a glance at the patients. What was there to see? There was a crowd there when Corona was making its rounds throughout the county. There was a somewhat smaller crowd now.

Crowds came the closest to extinction. It made the elderly couple in church question their bond. "If we were truly so close, why do we feel so lonely after two months of no church?" The flock saved them from having to answer that question. They could shake hands again. They could breathe again. Glory be, they could exist in the vicinity of other people again - but only a select few other people. Escaping the question of loneliness had them stumbling into a new question. The Carters were still alive, where were they? The Prestons, the Myers, the Holdens, Corona hadn't taken them. They'd spoken on the phone just the other day.

"Helen, it's all safe now. Cases have gone down. You don't have to be afraid to go out in public."

But Helen was afraid of the public. The world was made of long-distance intimacy, of face-time and skype, of telegram and discord. The teenage cell phone ninja on the bus didn't notice the difference. She'd settled on the shut-in lifestyle before the big double-20 hit. She'd battled the mask mandate all the way to expulsion, and

only took her vaccine when she obtained the idea of discretely filming the procession and editing it to some tone deaf dubstep. She was back enrolled in another school now, on Tik-Tok on a bus with her feet comfortably mashed into the back of the seat in front of her, wondering why the face-to-face part couldn't just go extinct if everyone was so afraid of personal proximity.

Can you hear it from here? An anthem; a heralding of a new era, sung in a pitch you can shatter windows with. Listen to it, sung to the tune of "Alouette:"

*2020 was the worst year ever  
2020, die and go to hell.*

There was an effigy to go with it; the boy scout in his backyard, starting a fire on his own for the first time. It was an easy thing to pull off with Mom and Dad back to their normal 9 to 5 selves. The masks would go into it; they were soaking with covid breath. Refrigerator magnets, two '2s' and two '0s,' would go into it. The boy scout handbook didn't say anything about the magnets and their flaming metal fumes. What's more, he was in full uniform while conducting his effigy, merit badge sash, red epaulets, scouty shorts and all (because it wouldn't be boy scouts if the pants were longer than half a stick past his waist). There weren't any scoutfellows to bid the year and its transgressions farewell, but maybe his neighbor would look out the window and enjoy the scene.

Like the refrigerator magnets and the numbers they represented, quarters had also come close to becoming goners. The culprits they bore that year were still around. A beatnik poet held one to the mirror and recited his six-word poem: "Why couldn't you just stay there?" and then paced around. "No..." he hadn't perfected it. Nobody he personally knew had succumbed to the coronavirus. Therefore, his contemporaries told him, "It isn't your poem to write and act out, that six-word epitaph of yours." He paced over the dirty laundry, past the unmade bed and cigarette butts. He had to have lost something that year. There had to be some collateral damage of which he'd been the victim. Surely he could imbue his performance with something from that year. "What would I find at the local necropolis? Maybe seeing the names of the deceased shall season my act."

The two women, one having spent more than a year marooned in Thailand, would have chased him out with a syringe had they known what he was up to. They weren't family to one another, these women. They'd survived high school together, and had survived every world crisis so far. Now they were here to face the passing of those who had not.

"Fourteen months and no contact. I know you're not one to ghost anyone. Your mind is its own engagement calendar, I thought... well..."

"That I died. I did test positive, and we had to set up a fallout shelter in my hotel room. My translator had to become my doctor, and I had nightmares that they euthanised me."

She didn't write the 2020 anthem, but you can bet she sang it when she heard it.

A veteran wrote in his journal: "I saw Kensbury take a bullet to the jaw in Afghanistan. Out of my one eye, I saw a grenade go off in the hands of a private who tried to throw it back. I worked on a drilling plantation in Louisiana once and watched a colleague get crushed by an unstable concrete roof. And now I watched as my brothers suffocated away - there's nothing glorious about surviving. I did my part to protect my people, but something slipped through."

There were those who went away for good. There were those who knew what awaited, if anything, on the post-mortem side of the big celestial door. They had surviving relatives. The relatives in turn had friends who didn't personally experience dying friends or family. Their family owned business was the one that suffered. Who has money to purchase trinkets, novelties, and dust collectors these days? They were barely making it through before the lockdown, now they couldn't afford to keep the shop open at all. The pandemic was over. Their financial troubles were not.

Nor were their psychological struggles; the mother's friends had lost family - they'd lost parents, siblings, spouses, and yes, not all children made it to see a year free of viruses. Each conversation she'd had with her friends over the phone, when she could afford the service, involved a trembling dam against tearful reports. People she hadn't known, but her friends had been quite close to. What greater shame could there be than to ask for a contribution from the poor?

*2020, die and go to hell.*