**What will we remember?**

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*(written in spurts between 10 May and 30 November, 2020; revised 3/11 Jan 2021)*

*What will we remember?*

*Will we have the perfect vision*

*of twenty-twenty*

*wisdom in hindsight*

*and difficult lessons learned*

*in this year of the pandemic?*

It all depends on where you were

--and where you are when memory strikes—

sheltered in place with roof and walls

paid for, your life and its paraphernalia

un-mortgaged,

closets full of seasonal wear

and cupboards neatly stocked;

or

leaning against the weak bamboo

and flimsy tin

listening to the blue plastic

shiver

because you did not have the strength

or means to make a roof;

fingering the notes, no longer crisp

from the day’s labour—such as there is—

counted out,

a measure of sweat and muscle;

or left with only your memories

and the fading noise of traffic

on streets once meant for travel

towards dreams, or dreams of work;

or waiting, walking, wanting

or forced

to return to a place you once escaped

its borders never a refuge,

only a reminder of what was

to be borne,

what one was born into.

It depends, like much else

of what we remember

and what we forget;

on what is inscribed into our bodies

and what flows, or is papered

over in our minds,

when smell-touch-taste

disappear

in a biochemical haze

gone viral,

or when muscle

no longer has the strength or space

for memory.

To remember is to allow the salt

to lick, to nick

wounds that cannot heal.

To remember is to unknow

the possibility of moving on.

To remember is to make

muscle memory of experience.

To remember is to feel gratitude

To remember is to stoke anger.

To remember is to die

every day.

To remember is to once again discover

living.

But what slice of memory slides into habit,

and grows quiet

within the folds of doing

what we do,

in the insidious takeover

of a New that quickly turns Normal?

Does remembering preserve us,

or keep evolutionary record?

Does it seep deep into

the genetic coda,

the body’s defense

against the mind’s amnesia?

Will we remember

the new-found quiet

that once seemed so elusive

yet once heard

morphs into

dull, repetitive

emptiness?

Masks, soap, water, distance,

all markers of a Something

whose origins settle

into a mechanical Doing

like those icons on our desktops,

flattened symbols

that have lost their beginnings,

and the generations for whom they

were material

drift away,

leaving not even a binary trail

in the ephemeral cloud[s].

Even as we remark—

in our emails

our telephone greetings

our notes to our forgetting selves—

on the strangeness of the moment,

on how “unprecedented” these times are,

will we remember

what makes it strange?

Or, having had the rug pulled

from under our tentative feet,

will we simply hold on

to words offered to us

in the million streams of social media posts,

crutches emptied of significance

and substance,

a million transient images—

#WFH #pandemic #stayathome #staysafe—

all bookmarked to a page

that’s disappeared into an internet archive?

But without these--

without

the boxes-on-screens

and forwarded texts

and pings from across oceans

and time zones,

the trackers and the data points

the claps and clangs and balcony serenades

the frontlines and the backstops--

how would we mark this long moment?

As these acts/words turn into digital bookmarks

that are guaranteed to show up

in years to come

on a #TBT--

Will we remember

--in our bones, in our blood--

how uncertainty

turned into resignation

and into acceptance

and then a way of being,

as systems-never-set broke down,

hastily rebuilt in political promises,

only to dissolve

as numbers continued to rise

[#Covidtracker],

distant until they loomed large,

a rising curve,

in cities and communities, neighborhoods and homes,

positives everywhere,

felt deep inside

lungs, nose, eyes, and

in our blood *and* in our bones?

Will we remember

how the Exceptional

turned into Routine?

How the horror became background noise

filtered through our screens

as the eerie silence slunk away,

overtaken by traffic-as-almost-usual

and the images captured

in once-in-a-lifetime opportunities

by photojournalists

made us forget that this was

no exception

but a recitation of the routine

hiding in plain sight,

a subterranean lifeworld

that had always occupied

the knife’s edge

as the rest of us conducted

our everyday cruelties?

Will we be allowed

to remember

the possibility of stillness

of slowness

of care

the startled acknowledgment

of the invisible-rendered-briefly in news images

and crowdfunding campaigns,

even as it recedes into the shadows

of other, tinselly, breaking news?

Or will these new streams of storytelling

fuel waves of forgetting

as we [again] buy into shiny new promises

of convenience and consumption?

Will we remember

how to smile

unmasked?

Or to cover distance with touch?

Or the mundane comforts of

regular workhours

with breaks for coffee, lunch and tea?

Some things will work their way into art

nestling there till we prepare for discomfort

on occasional museum visits

and school field trips;

while others will be noted

into archives

for some future historian,

mutated by changing climate

and the withdrawal of once-connected species,

to discover and lay meaning,

to point fingers at our perfidy

or marvel at our complacence

or incompetence

and grow indignant

at our forgetfulness

and

[there is no other way to say this]

our utter stupidity.

Now.

Even as I write

The city streets scream resurgence:

horns, wheels, sirens, rush,

motoring through vestigial anxiety

and caution

in an insistent bid

to reclaim

business-as-used-to-be.

Masks dangle, are half worn,

as we begin to dismiss

those vague mythologized fears

and that muscle memory,

no longer suppressed by a fleeting concern

for a changing world,

reasserts itself.

After all, a year is not eternity

or even an aeon

and Anthropocene

is marked, if anything,

by the humdrum of crisis.

As I tap the snooze button

on my archiving device

and prepare, absently

for the start of a screened day

that seems like any other,

I briefly wonder

at the disappearance of the

new

into the normal.

I scroll back

to a synced calendar

and find cryptic notes—

could be from any place,

any time.

Remembering resides

in the obliterating white squares

of un-penciled gaps

between zoom and meet,

where once there were people,

tangled together in shared breath,

random laughter and conversation,

unmuted,

the mundane serendipities

of handshakes and hugs

and a hundred other

unthinking acts

that populated the time

before this time,

when we moved on screen

even as so many others

moved off it,

never having discovered

(or being afforded)

the possibility of alternative lives.

So, at this moment,

before the inevitable forgetting

sets in,

[jabbed into us?]

I wonder

will we remember

the retreat

from the streets

as a flight,

a refuge,

a resigned

pillowing into

a bulk-ordered

existence;

or, having nowhere

other than the street,

forced to face

the vulnerability

of exposure?

It all depends

on where you were,

where you are,

where you find yourself,

when memory

in all its costumed avatars

breaks free of its muscle moorings,

and finds itself framed

in filtered photographs of a past

edges frayed, sepia-tinted,

that we can never be quite sure

that we really lived.