

A Pandemic Season

Represented in Poetry

HP Rivers

Compiled for PS-8450-1: Illness, Healing, and Health,

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These poems were all written from August – November 2020 and are presented in the order in which they were written. I entered this project hoping to curate a collection of poetry specifically on the themes of illness and healing, in line with the themes of my class. However, somewhere around the beginning of November I realized that the entirety of my work this season is a beautiful testament to my journey over the last few months, which has been even more intense and demanding than my already-intense and demanding healing journey has been over the last few years.

The overall body of work does speak to healing, just more so to the non-linear and often non-sensical routes that healing takes. Trauma is a multifaceted illness just like any other, and deserves to be explored and revered with nuance and curiosity, even when we would rather look away.

This body of work is dedicated with love to everyone else on the healing journey. May we all have the strength to not be strong when we need to, the determination to rest unapologetically, and the sacred safety of loving and supportive fellow travelers.

The Goddess is a Southern Grandma

Based on a true story.

Waving my wand of sage and desperation I say,
“May nothing evil cross this door.”

I say,
“I release all
attachments,
energies,
entities,
and agreements
Which no longer serve me.
Only
That which serves
my highest good
may stay.”

And then
The smoke
Must have gotten to my head
‘Cause I heard the Goddess saying,
“You tell ‘em, baby.”

The Goddess says,
“Let there be laughter here,
And music.
Let us
Contort ourselves in jubilation
Without apology.
Release
Everything which does not serve
And welcome in:
Abundance.

Welcome
Joy and resilience
As spiritual practice,
Our toes tapping
And our fingers trembling
Like it’s the first day of spring
And we’ve got a whole lot of blooming to do.

Open the door
And tell 'em you're coming –
All of you,
Every bruised and brilliant bit of you
Every half-finished masterpiece
And your steadfast determination
To save the world,
Every holy declaration of your worth,
Every ounce of validation
You never had to earn.”

And the Goddess says,
Sweet as tea,
“Mother Mary
Liked to dance sometimes,
With baby Jesus on her hip,
Laughin’ right along.
They’d smile at the moon,
And I’d smile right back at them.

So go outside, baby,
Breathe in deep the midnight air
And let there be moonlight
So I can see y’all dancing.”

And it was good.

Blessed Be.

Climate/Change

The day

The sky turned orange in California

And a six-year-old child

Died in the flames,

It poured and thundered in Florida,

And I quietly decided

That I'll never have another child.

I think the kindest thing

I could possibly do

Is spare another brand new soul

From having to try and

Rise from the ashes.

My first,

Now only,

Still recoils

At the sound of thunder.

I pray

For the mothers breathing ashes,

Wish them reprieve

From the thunder in their chests.

I pray

For Our Mother,

Who art in flames.

Wish her winds of healing

And rains of change.

Deadbeat

In the wild,
Only about 6%
Of mammal fathers
Ever invest time
In their offspring.

So really,
Maybe it was just
Asking
Too much.

Maybe
It's just not
In his nature.

The Village

He runs warm
And is probably
Perfectly content
To sleep with blankets
Haphazardly thrown
Around his feet.
But still, he burrows in
And breathes just a little softer
When I tuck him in again.

We all need someone
To lovingly tend to our comfort
Even,
And especially,
When we are not able to ourselves,

Even,
And especially,
When we claim to be
Perfectly content
Without.

We never stop needing
The village.

Coverup

I have seven tattoos.

Three are coverups.

The only thing constant
Is change.

A Baptism

I drape my legs over the side of the bathtub
And my child splashes them with bubbles.
I think of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples.

I never felt unworthy until I held you in my arms,
Never felt terror until I counted your tiny breaths,
Never knew God until I saw your smile.

Baptized now by bubbles
And holy, well-earned tears,
Somehow,
I am saved.

#RBG

Blessed ancestor,
Guardian of dignity,
Champion of We
Who would be called "less than,"

Rest easy.

For the tears will not dry
Upon our cheeks
Before we focus our grief
On all the work left to do.

Blessed Be.

The Bird

I anoint a dead bird with holy water
from the memorial garden at the church where I grew up.
Weightless as it is lifeless, it knows not that I drape it now with flowers
And say a prayer. I light a candle,
and beseech its spirit to bless other realms with its flight,
Continuing to and transcending its Highest Good.

Yellow is my favorite color, even on still, soft feathers.

Fall means nothing here,
in the heat of lingering summer.

Hell means nothing here, in tragedy upon tragedy –
Never a calm moment to catch one's breath.

Death means nothing here, in the garden of the church
That doesn't preach of heaven.

We do not die.
We reach the Highest Good
We can possibly achieve
And then, we fly
To the next adventure, leaving our bodies
Cold on the path to the front door,
So that other beings might anoint them
With holy water
And prayers
For a Highest Good
That is so much *more*.

Shamxn

Come listen to the big drums
The heartbeats
Of the cosmos, praying you to live,
Weary as you might be.

Dear one,
This healing is your heartbeat
The prayers you bless the world with,
Bless yourself in the process.

There are no ancestors cheering for you.

Rather, they weep
Tears of wisdom,
Knowledge of the path to come
For they have walked it too,
But none ever so thoroughly as you.

You, breaker of patterns,
Collector of found feathers,
Rescuer of cockroaches
And bumblebees -
No creature unworthy.

Chosen one -
They had all been chosen, too.

Come listen to the big drums,
Your heartbeat
Singing from its cage,
Praying you to finish what they started

And bless the world.

New

I even sleep
Like I'm daring the moon
To abandon me

*Look at how deeply
I burrow my face in this pillow.
Don't you know
How much
I love the dark?*

At this point
I shouldn't be surprised
When she returns every evening.

But every month like clockwork,
The new moon makes me wonder
If she's finally had enough.

Capital

The doctor says I need to rest
And practice some self-care.
Then, he says, my symptoms will
Resolve on their own.

I say, “My insurance doesn’t cover that.”

There is a deep, knowing pain
Behind his half-smile.
It’s not his fault
I’m disposable.

I pay 3.44 hours of my labor
For my copay
And go back to work.

Darling,

Don't you know?

You raise the vibration

Of the entire Universe

Every time you sing.

Soul Chatter

Dancing on a moonbeam, They ask,
“What if we go to Earth next?”

“I’ve never known of
A more toxic planet.”

“I’ve heard of two,
“And besides, they have Love there.”

“What,” They ask,
An immortal soul bewildered, “is that?”

“It’s this,” They say,
Gesturing to all of the Universe.
“But you feel it.”

“What is feeling?
That sounds terrible.”

“I agree.
But every being who has ever gone
Tells that the Love made it worth the trip.”

“I suppose it’s worth a try.
Let’s go.”

Oak Tree

I think Godde
Is a sturdy oak.
Something ordinary,
But strong
Enough to bend the arc
Towards life,
With nests in Their branches
As They exhale
The very air we breathe -
Deep roots
Holding Us All steady -
But not so obscure
That We forget
Just how close
They really are.

Midway (Leave Room for Jesus)

2005

At the Midway Middle School Spring Formal
Pre-pubescent girls wear white t-shirts
Under their sparkly dresses –
Their preachers,
And their mothers,
Afraid that someone might think them immodest
If their shoulders show.

The bus driver
Pulls over to yell and pray
Any time someone says, “goddamn” –
And scolds me
For sitting next to a high school boy.

I do not wear a white t-shirt
Under my sweet black dress
And my mother’s pearls.

I am a whore,
Named so for wearing my favorite skirt
On my first day of school
After I moved from “the city” –
A suburb of a nearby college town.

At Midway,
Folks either live on farm, on the lake, or in a trailer.
There is no in-between.
Of 150 students in the whole school,
140 live in total poverty.

I do not blame them
For blaming other people for their problems
When they have been left behind too.

It is easier to put on a red hat
Than take on the system that that made it.

I have my first kiss on that dance floor,
With a boy who shares my father's first name.
He tells me he is going on tour that summer
With a country music star,
The one whose song
He'd written down,
Word for word,
And slipped into my locker.

I choose to believe him,
Even though I know better.

The science teacher barks,
"Leave room for Jesus"
And it echoes in my head
The whole next year –

I think the worst bullying came from the teachers.

Probably because I was different,
Because I was shameless.

Probably because I did not raise my hand
When they asked
Who went to church that Sunday.

In hindsight,
Maybe my thick black eyeliner,
My heathen smile,
My new fascination with justice
And Broadway
Betrayed the queerness in me
That could only lay dormant so long.

I wonder if that was why
They pretended not to see me crying

Or if it was my uncovered shoulders,
My lack of shame,
Or the places I never went
On Sundays.

2017

Whitney was in my seventh grade English class.
She cuts my hair short.
She is the only person from Midway
I have ever seen again.

We do not talk about it.

2018

I come out, finally.
To the pastor from the place
Where I go on Sundays

The place where every single *goddamn*
Is honored as a prayer.

2020

I remember that 15,000 gay men
Were sent to concentration camps
During the Holocaust.

I think about a video I saw
Of immigrants illegally entering Canada
At a designated checkpoint
And being offered food, water, and an embrace

I think of another video I saw
Of white thread on red hats
Being ripped from the seams
And reconstructed to say,
“Welcome to Canada.”

I think, “I have family there.”

I think, “I lived in the closet for 13 years.
I can do hard things.”

I think,
“The election is next week.
I might have to erase this poem
After it is over,

Bury it with my Pride flag and my shame –
But it will always exist.”

I wonder if anyone
Is leaving room
For Jesus.

South City

The first apartment I lived in
On my own with my child
Had mold growing in the walls
And new windows.

Some would probably say
We lived in a bad neighborhood.

I would tell them
Bad is not a synonym for *black*.

We lived in a Black neighborhood,
Where my neighbors
Draped themselves in my doorway
To make sure I was ok -
But would never dare call the police,

Where I saw the face of God
More often than they felt the hand of mercy,
Where my white skin was, for once, *other*.

I will never understand
How any nation could call itself *great*
While the face of God
Goes hungry.

The only people I feared there
Were the other people
Who looked like me,
But never the granny
That called me *baby* at the checkout,
The owner of the gas station
Who always gave my son a candy -
And was killed in a shooting
Not long after we moved away.

I got out when my lease was up,
Moved to a neighborhood
With more people
Who looked like me -
And better schools,
Grocery stores on every street -

Not just one market
That sold sugar
And almost-expired meat.

You cannot build
An entire nation
On top of a Trail of Tears,
By the sweat of the enslaved,
And call it *great*
When hope leaks
From every gunshot wound

You cannot bow
Before the altars of
Greed and Capitalism
And be surprised
When you come away
With blood on your knees

You cannot place new glass
In the windows of a condemned house
And say everything is better
When the mold in the walls
Is still creeping
To the bed
Where your child sleeps.

A Prayer for Election Week

Goddess, Spirit, God,
Love of many names,
of no names,
and of names too intimate to speak –
grant us comfort,
for we are all living with fear.

Yes, all of us –
those who whimper,
those who hyperventilate,
those who disengage,
those whose anger and vitriol
betray the terror
lurking beneath our confidence.

May we all rest.

May we surrender
to the beauty of our dreams,
to the power of our highest good,
and to the service
of the highest good of all.

May our dreams manifest change
and our fear be replaced with rest
and an abiding peace
that only You,
though We,
can bring.

May it be so.

This Body

"How did you get so cute?"

"From you!"

How did I get so fat?

From her.

You see, she taught me *fat*.

I didn't know that *fat* existed,
I did not know that *fat* was a bad thing
Until I saw her sprint across the kitchen
To place her hand on my cherub belly
And tell me to suck it in.

I learned to hate my body that day
At eight years old,
My hands wrinkly and wet with dishwater,
The sparkle evaporating from my eyes.

Two long decades later,
You wrap your arms
Around my soft and tired skin
And just for a moment,
I feel the sparkle return.

You see, this body
Makes magic.

This body grew the most beautiful
Human being, and gave milk, for a time.
It dried up quickly when I stopped
Eating ~~for two~~ again

This body gave me
You.

Every ripple,
Every stretch mark,
Every pound that I would call *ugly*
You would call *holy*,
You would call *safe*.

Thank Goddess
That this body is safe for you –

I am learning
That it is safe for me, too.

How did you get so cute?
Maybe it's your earnest giggles,
Your abiding love,
Every dying insect
You are so determined to save.

How did I get so lucky
That this body
Gets to bear witness
To You?

Great

My great-grandmother
On my grandfather's side
Was tough as nails.
Actually,
Nails were tough as her.

But nobody ever wants to talk about
The fact that she was not a nice person.

Death softens people,
Smooths the edges of heartache,
Shushes the ripples
Of generational trauma
In the interest
Of not making waves.

My great-grandmother
On my grandmother's side
Was always soft,
Was always safe,
Is still,
Fifteen years from the grave,
The reason I smile
Every time I smell chamomile,
The Godliness I find
In every summer rain.

When I call on the ancestors
They both come running.
But I know which ancestors
I want to run to.

I know the legacy
I want to leave
In my wake.

Florida

Alternate title: I Can't Breathe

Florida has the energy of a swamp
And I thought it was just the humidity
Until they found the graves
Of enslaved people
On a golf course
And I realized
It's not the humidity.

It's the way the past hangs in the air
Like dust begging to settle,
Like cheap perfume
In an antique bottle
Begging to be sprayed.

Someone found
Thousand year old butter
In a bog
In Ireland,
Still as fresh as the day it fell in

Some things
Don't decompose

Some things
Just become
The energy,
The swampy air

The hurricane
Of humidity
In lungs
That cannot breathe,

Children
Buried on golf courses
For walking home
With skittles in their hand,

Mothers churning lullabies
With their hurricane tears

When we moved here
I worried about alligators
But it turns out
One is more likely to be killed
By a police officer
Than an alligator
In Florida

I wonder
How many more ghosts
We will make
For the swamp.

Generational/Trauma

A thousand years ago
One of my great-great grandfathers
Picked up a stone
On his walk home
And didn't think twice
About putting it in his pocket.
When he got home
He gave it to his daughter.
Ten years later,
She picked up her own
And gave her's
And her father's
To her own child.

One thousand years later,
My pockets are heavy
With soul bruises,
The skinned knees
And heavy hearts
Of a hundred children
Who never got the chance
To throw the pain they were gifted
Back to the place it came from,
Who were chained to the stone
Before they could speak,
Who never meant
To keep the family tradition going
But never knew
How to stop it
Either.

Waves

If you think about it
Every wave
Is a kiss from the moon
Reminding us
That no matter how much
The sand beneath our feet shifts
We are still whole.

Gratitude
Means a lot of things
Especially
Knowing the moon means well
Even when the next wave comes too soon
And still being glad
For the moonlight.

Life

The thing about living
Is it demands to be done passionately

If you live on the sidelines long enough
Not wanting to die,
But also not *not* wanting to die
Eventually you won't have the choice

Passive doesn't cut it
And that terrifies me

Because I have access
To sages and healers
Who will gladly cure me
But first
I have to want to heal,
I have to want to live
And I've never been ready
For that sort of commitment.

But I am determined to learn.