

Scribes

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It's day 7 of lockdown. You've stolen some time to write at the end of the day, but the clocks have gone back and you're too shattered and keep falling asleep at the keyboard.

There's nothing much to write, but you feel you owe a record.

To someone.

You don't know why. The record's already being kept between the news networks and Twitter. You can't stop yourself doom-scrolling once the children are in bed.

You sit on the floor in the hall, your back to the radiator where their school clothes are drying, surrounded by their clutter of lunch boxes, school bags, trainers and chunky black shoes, lit by your laptop on the first stair.

The kitchen and sitting room seem too cold and dark.

Three NHS doctors died from Covid-19, that's being reported today. They all have names like yours. Funny, foreign names, is what the elderly white patients say with desperate helplessness, trying to read your name badge, trying to remember the name of the other funny, foreign doctor they just saw. We all look alike to them, brown doctor, black hair, blue scrubs.

The prime minister now has the virus, and you don't know how they justified testing him for it, if he only has mild symptoms. At least the future king is elderly and met criteria.

The PM is the idiot who told the nation to take it on the chin, just a few weeks ago. Not your PM.

The majority voted for him in a Boaty-McBoatface landslide of irresponsibility, because he gives good caricature. Democracy is the tyranny of the majority; that was John Stuart Mill.

It's long past midnight. You're getting up for your shift in six hours.

One of your colleagues says she's scared to come into work. You wonder why you aren't scared. You have four school-age children at home. You have so much to lose.

You can't stop yourself writing. You shouldn't write.

Not unless it's something necessary that only you could write. Something with heart and meaning, which can only come from you. Like Bernie writing about Black British WomXn, Naomi and Margaret writing about Female Power.

Race and Gender. The Big Topics. What's left for you?

Your daily reality is the same as it is for everyone who works in a hospital.

Disease, Vulnerability and Death.

But now you find yourself at the frontline of an unprecedented global pandemic.

A front seat in history. Although history is always happening somewhere.

We just don't pay attention to it, if it's far away, unfiled and unreported.

This happened right here. It is forced onto every screen. It is every news report, every post and tweet. But somehow, you barely noticed it happening. You were too busy doing your job.

When a friend in Oxford didn't hug you, you thought he was being precious. When he asked you your opinion on the pandemic, citing the Italian trajectory, la quarantena, you thought he was being alarmist. You thought the word pandemic was overkill.

Remember when your friend of Chinese origin coughed on a tube carriage and cleared it, and you thought the escaping passengers were all bigots?

Remember when the old lady asked loudly in the café if anyone was Italian before she ordered, and you called her out as an old racist?

You still think they were wrong. But you were too.

And now everyone is two metres from everyone else, when they're not locked down in their homes.

You suppose that everyone's writing a book, during lockdown. They're writing about isolation, about domestic violence, comic romances about mismatched couples who find themselves trapped together.

They're writing about being perched and twittering in a gilded cage, their phones providing a pocket-sized window on a wider world, while birds fly free outside. Soaring in great fluid circles over fields and seafront.

The birds own your town now. You suppose you should welcome your new feathered overlords. They're noisy chanters in the morning, but they're not doing a worse job than the last lot.

Someone clever is probably writing a version from the virus's perspective, in experimental blank verse and the first-person plural.

Doctors are too busy working to write books, even if they were the sort who wanted to write. It was a huge, humbling wake-up call that none of the doctors on your ward had heard of the Booker Prize. On medical social media, the doctors who keep a newspaper column are vilified as media-hungry opportunists. Reporting on your experiences, on patient experiences, is considered bad taste.

Those who do so are served with Who-the-hell-doyou-think-you-are?

But you're persisting in this account, to offer it to some future self who might forget. Some future other who lived through this too. The experience of disease is subjective, everyone who looks it in the face sees someone different.

Every individual experience matters, a silver thread of your own truth wound about it. You will write. A little.

A lot. You can unspool this experience and share it.

Maybe, today, tonight, in these early hours, sitting in the dark of your hallway, you're the scribe for your tribe.

On this seventh day of lockdown, you get an email that four patients have died, so far, from Covid. Across the three hospitals in the Trust. Among the thousands of patients, that doesn't seem too bad. But then you read up on Twitter about those three NHS doctors who have died. There'd been talk about them in the hospital. Fearful mutinous mutterings in the mess, in the quiet corners at the ends of long corridors. The first British clinician deaths in the UK due to the virus.

One is originally from Pakistan, like you. One GP, two surgeons.

The sort of people who like to say this sort of thing out loud say that they shouldn't be described as British.

They're brown, from somewhere else. It doesn't matter how many times you say you're British, that questioning, where are you from, no, I mean where are you REALLY from, so where are your parents from, no, where are they REALLY from, is relentless. Comically so, almost.

The dead doctors. The brown doctors. From somewhere else, once upon a time.

You know there's no point arguing or even replying. It's like dousing a fire with petrol. But you're thinking, how much more do you have to give? When do you get to belong? A life's work devoted to caring for others.

A life. Their lives. Given away.

If they had proper protective equipment, it wouldn't have happened.

How much more should they have been given? When do you get to feel safe?

You had no scrubs for your last on-call shift in A&E.

You wore leggings and stole a scrub top from theatres.

They show you the Covid gear that's been issued for the Covid bay in your ward. Just a regular surgical mask and a gown. No sealed mask tested with a foul smell sprayed in the outside air, like in the training. No hood.

No visor. Nothing to cover your hair, or your shoes. You'll walk straight into the virus. You'll soak it up in your hair like a sponge. You're going to get it, too.

It's inevitable.

You're surprised you haven't got it already. You've been more exposed than anyone you know. Face to face and hand on hand with patients who have gone on to test positive.

You take that knowledge home, every night.

Every day, you walk back in the wind, along the cabbage fields. Sometimes in the sunshine, now the days are lengthening. You think that might help lift the viral load from your clothes.

You saw a photo of a single human hair studded with the virus like seeds on a strawberry.

Every day, you strip your clothes and shoes and socks as soon as you shut the front door behind you, and squash your clothes into a plastic bag and hang it high, where it can't be touched, at the entrance to the house. Your stethoscope and ID cards, which hang around your neck, have already been wiped and stuffed in a plastic packet in your handbag.

Every day, you wash your hands before you touch your children. You know how to do it properly, and you show them that you are doing it.

Every day, your hands are cracked and dry.

You hug the children, and then you dress.

They've added you to another WhatsApp group, where people complain about the viral-loaded scrubs that have been dumped in the mess, where they can infect everyone. The wards don't all have places to get the scrubs, or to put the scrubs back into the laundry cycle. It used to be just theatres and ITU who wore scrubs.

They have promised fifty sets of scrubs in the mess, which isn't enough. It's a sort of Russian roulette based on shift pattern; if you happen to be on earlies, you'll get a pair.

Today, you had bought your children the cookies you'd promised, since they had run out the last time you went shopping. Their father tried to wash the paper packets before you stopped him, as they'd be ruined if they got wet. You left them in the sun instead.

They say that the first case of coronavirus cluster in Europe was caused by someone passing the salt to someone else at a canteen, who passed it to someone else sharing their workstation, and so on and so on.

Other doctors are vocal about self-isolating from their families, but you don't even think about that. You tell yourself that children are invincible. Just as old people are vulnerable.

This is a clever, millennial virus that leans into every trope about ageing.

This is a schoolyard bully virus that stalks past the strong and spits on the weak.

You can't empathise with the online whining from clustered groups of bored people, it bothers you how they assume that every experience is their own, as they bother you with minutiae and bombard you with questions that are meant to be about you, but are really about them.

You feel pestered. Before, you only ever saw people outside the house, your place is too untidy and noisy and uncivilised to have anyone grown-up visit, but now everyone is beaming into your living room, peering out of your tablet at you, frowning over your shoulders.

Distracted by your fraying at-home clothes and the clutter in the background. You still have a Christmas tree and pumpkin lanterns hanging, as the children like the fairy lights, and you suppose the season will come back around soon enough. You still have cupboards plastered with childish art and photos from Reception school projects.

Everyone sees behind the curtain. Your lecturing and charity colleagues, your friends, your mum's partner in pyjamas, your in-laws, your children's friends' parents.

Judging your interiors, the Blu-Tacked pictures by the children, and withering flowers kept stubbornly on the corner of the table.

Those who don't beam in are chattering intensely and persistently on WhatsApp, even the elusive rota coordinator and administrators, popping up on your personal number, requesting your responses across weekends and evenings.

It seems inappropriate to complain. At least you're not dead. At least you're not bored.

You're back on your shift, in six hours. It feels like you only just got home.

You walk into the hospital and hunt for scrubs. Then you stride to the ward, and find a computer to start the patient list ahead of the ward round, looking through the notes of those new patients who have joined you overnight. You won't get to pee from when you start at 8.30 a.m., until after the ward round is done at 2 p.m.

You eat a sandwich with one hand while sorting out patient plans, scribbling notes and ordering tests.

You don't sit down. On principle. You're better on your feet.

You ask the ward nursing team to swab two of the long-term patients for the virus. Their observations and clinical signs are suspicious. It's not surprising if they've caught it.

Your team don't trust the negative results for patients.

They say the swabs are only 70 per cent accurate, at best.

A woman is probably dying, and there's nothing they can do for her. Can't even get a line into her veins for her blood transfusions and IV replacements. She's too puffed up with fluid, and there is no visible or palpable vein.

So you get an ultrasound machine, and teach a junior how to cannulate a vein with the ultrasound screen flickering at the bedside in black and white. You show her the pulsing of the brachial artery, and how to avoid it, and the compressible vein. You unsheathe the needle, and slide it into the centre of the vein, and you see on the fluid screen the white point of the needle piercing the wall, the venous blood flowing up through the tube.

You flush sterile fluid through the cannula, before connecting it to the unit of blood hanging by the bed. The patient is relieved and thankful that you can do it at the first attempt. If you hadn't succeeded, you or someone else would have had to try and try again until it was done, as she needs her transfusions to live.

Despite all this, despite your basic competence in providing patient care, despite working fast and hard all day, working through lunch, you still leave late.

Your day is as muddled as your thoughts.

You get home and you are tempted, for a moment, not to strip at the door. Really, what's the point?

You do it anyway, as you do every-every-every day, despite feeling that you've already gone past the point of no return.

You feel the world has changed.

You saw patients' relatives stealing the hand sanitiser from the end of the bed, the same stuff that you need to keep their loved one safe. You ran out of it on the ward and were without it for a couple of hours, until someone was able to get a new supply.

You've seen shelves emptied of fruit and flour and toilet roll. Everyone has become a hermit staycationer, baking and peeing and wanking.

You feel that a crowd will be something people drool at on their screens like porn.

We'll all be dead in the next hundred years, and the ones who left early, well, they just missed the queue at the gates.

I was always punctual, comments your sister, from her place at the table, next to her withered flowers in the vase. That was one of my flaws.

It's like the set answer you practise for an interview, the acceptable weakness that shows you self-reflect. An untruth sprinkled with fairy dust. You used to say the same thing at interviews, say that you were annoyingly punctual, which was funny because it was so blatantly untrue, and un-you. Stealing her line as easily as you stepped into her smart shoes, loaned for the day because she despaired of your scruffy boots. You said it at one job interview you were thirty minutes late for, and they didn't challenge you, as they had been running too late with the other candidates to notice. You were three hours late for your Oxford interview, and missed your Economics slot with the professor. When they rescheduled, you explained inflation using the wrinkled fruit in the professor's bowl. One apple, two pears. The Economics professor told you years later that he was impressed by your use of props. By your ability to make something complex sound simple.

I was always late to the party, you reply. That's one of mine.

Not the one I'd pick, she scoffs.

This is an extract from *Everything is True* (Bloomsbury, 2021). A recording can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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