

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, unfilmed 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.

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

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