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Margaret Randall

Estrellas de mar sobre una playa:
los poemas de la pandemia



Starfish on a Beach:
The Pandemic Poems

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ANIMAL CONCERT

Margaret Randall

**ESTRELLAS DE MAR SOBRE UNA PLAYA:
LOS POEMAS DE LA PANDEMIA**

**STARFISH ON A BEACH:
THE PANDEMIC POEMS**

Traducción / Translation

Sandra Toro





ABISINIA EDITORIAL

Buenos Aires, Argentina

abisinia.editorial@gmail.com

www.abisiniareview.com

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Estrellas de mar sobre una playa:
los poemas de la pandemia



These poems are not for the dead but for those who survived this time around, for the dead have lived their lives while the survivors must live with their loss.

Estos poemas no son para los muertos, sino para los que esta vez sobrevivieron. Porque los muertos ya vivieron sus vidas, mientras que los sobrevivientes tendrán que vivir con su pérdida.

As the pandemic unfolded, I posted many of these poems on my Facebook page. Some also appeared, either in English or Spanish or both, in: *Abisinia Review* (Argentina), *Altazor* (Chile), *Revista Casa de las Américas* (Cuba), *Río Grande Review*, and *Tricontinental Newsletter* (United States).

A medida que se extendía la pandemia, publiqué muchos de estos poemas en mi cuenta de Facebook. Algunos también aparecieron —en inglés, en español o bilingües— en: *Abisinia Review* (Argentina), *Altazor* (Chile), *Revista Casa de las Américas* (Cuba), *Río Grande Review* y *Tricontinental Newsletter* (Estados Unidos).

I wrote these poems...



I wrote these poems during the extraordinary time between March and May 2020, when the world suddenly found itself in a situation without modern precedent. A new and virulent viral infection called COVID-19 and popularly referred to as the coronavirus began in the Chinese city of Wuhan and made its way across the globe. Before travel restrictions, quarantines and other precautionary measures could be established, great numbers of people were infected in Iran, South Korea, Japan, Italy, the United States, and eventually almost every nation on earth. Then the death toll began mounting, mounting. By early April 100,000 worldwide were presumed to have died but we knew this number represented a fraction of those who had succumbed to the virus; without sufficient test kits or the time to evaluate every victim, it was impossible to know. When you read this, these numbers will have increased many times over.

Depending on their willingness to listen to the scientists, governments addressed the menace differently. Some, besieged by fundamentalist ignorance and misplaced allegiance, failed to take action until large numbers of their citizens were ill and dying, their medical facilities were overwhelmed and their economies in freefall. The more scientifically oriented governments acted immediately and appropriately and were able to contain the invisible terror, at least on their home ground. But our world is connected in so many different ways today that the actions of the

larger more powerful nations inevitably affected the entire world.

Within each country people also suffered varying degrees of risk. The elderly and those with underlying health issues were judged most vulnerable. But class and culture also influenced who would get sick and where. People of color were infected at much higher rates than mainstream white populations. As always the poor were the most exposed and unprotected. Those without homes endured added misery. Prisoners warehoused in crowded unsanitary conditions knew they had little hope. Refugees condemned to the camps on our southern border were abandoned to an uncertainty worse than they'd already known.

As always, those with access had a better chance of surviving while “throwaway” populations were doomed. As businesses were forced to close, hourly wage earners lost jobs they may never get back. Tens of thousands of small enterprises may be shuttered forever. Government aid packages and subsidies went to corporations deemed “too big to fail.”

If you fell ill with something other than the virus it was almost impossible for you to be seen by a healthcare professional. All procedures deemed optional were cancelled for the duration. In many places, abortion was labeled one of these: conservative public officials were quick to take advantage of the crisis to limit democratic practices. And in health facilities overwhelmed with victims of the virus doctors and nurses were called upon to

work intolerable hours and often lacked the resources they needed to treat their patients. Many of them got ill and died. Health-care personnel also had to begin choosing who would live and who die. Triage became trauma.

In the United States the crisis coincided with the presidency of Donald Trump, a sociopath known for his racism and xenophobia, erratic behavior, refusal to listen to those who know, and his self-serving political machinations. From the beginning, his failure to recognize the crisis for what it was and lack of leadership cost tens of thousands of lives. Many state governors and other elected officials, on the other hand, demonstrated great ability and compassion in a situation for which they were totally unprepared and weren't getting the support they needed from the federal government. In a more intimate sense, individuals were generally kind to one another, noticing who needed help and providing it generously.

We remembered the 1918 Spanish flu and other worldwide epidemics. But the world has changed dramatically in the past century and both risk and containment posed very different challenges now. Some likened the emergency to European fascism at mid-twentieth century, the Cambodian Killing Fields, 9/11, or situations provoked by major earthquakes, floods and fires. This emergency was everywhere, though, and comparisons meant little.

Some countries acted not only quickly and efficiently but also with great demonstrations of solidarity. No sooner

was it evident that measures never before taken would have to be implemented, China immediately constructed and outfitted several immense hospitals. It implemented strict containment policies and demanded obedience from its citizens. And as soon as it had its own problem under control, the Chinese government began sending planeloads of trained personnel and medical equipment abroad. Cuba, too, showed its long-practiced solidarity, delivering doctors and disinfection systems to countries in need. Cuba's free and universal healthcare system, in place for decades, limited the spread of the virus in-country.

US Americans were told to stay home, self-isolate, disinfect our homes and clothing; and when we had to go out wear facemasks and gloves and practice what was called "social distancing," meaning staying six feet away from others. We didn't know if these measures would be effective; scientists were racing to understand the virus's characteristics and recommendations were often contradictory. Anyone who could, worked from home. For many, in this time of digital options, this was possible. Many more were simply furloughed or fired. Schools and universities closed, there were no university graduating classes of 2020, and the hopes of a generation were erased in what seemed like a single stroke. The emergency aid package voted on by Congress and signed into law by the president, favored corporations over the working man or woman. Life for most of the world's inhabitants will never be the same, either because they lost one or more loved ones to the pandemic or because their economic futures changed irrevocably.

I stayed home and wrote poems. They emerged in a torrent, one after another, sometimes three or more in a single day. I present them here, not in the order in which they were written but arranged and revised as the crisis took shape and took over. They are one poet's witness to an extraordinary time.

M. R.

Escribí estos poemas...

