Somrita Urni Ganguly

“Do you know how many people die every day of hunger in India? Of tuberculosis? Of rape? Of communal violence?”

India, Calcutta, 31 January – 07 May 2020

Somrita Urni Ganguly is a professor, and award-winning poet and literary translator. She was a Fulbright Doctoral Research Fellow at Brown University, Rhode Island. She is the editor of Quesadilla and Other Adventures: Food Poems (2019), and has translated Dinesh Chandra Chattopadhyay's Firesongs (2019), Ashutosh Nadkar's Shakuni: Master of the Game (2019), and Shankarlal Sengupta's The Midnight Sun: Love Lyrics and Farewell Songs (2018). Somrita translates from Bengali and Hindi to English, and was selected by the National Centre for Writing, UK, as an emerging translator in 2016. She received a grant from the British Centre for Literary Translation in 2020 to attend the International Literary Translation and Creative Writing Summer School at the University of East Anglia. In 2017, she was invited as translator-in-residence at Cove Park, Scotland, and as poet-in-residence at Arcs of a Circle, Mumbai, an artistes' residency organized by the US Consulate in Bombay. Somrita's work has been showcased at the London Book Fair, and she has read her works in several cities such as Aligarh, Bloomington, Bombay, Boston, Calcutta, Chandigarh, Cove, Delhi, Hyderabad, Itanagar, London, Miami, Providence, Shantiniketan, and Singapore. She has been published in Asymptote, Words Without Borders, In Other Words, and Trinity College Dublin's Journal of Literary Translation, among others. Somrita teaches British literature to undergraduate and graduate students in Calcutta. She has presented research papers at various national and international conferences in India, Singapore, UK, and USA, and has fourteen academic publications to her credit. She is a recipient of the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund Award (2013) and the Sarojini Dutta Memorial Prize (2011).

Somrita Urni Ganguly

This write-up contains excerpts from my diary, primarily from March 2020. I am a professor, poet, and literary translator, presently working in Calcutta, India. I have been living in my family house in Calcutta, India, with my father, since the beginning of the lockdown in my country(March 2020). On July 30th, my father and I completed 135 days of self-isolation. My fiancé, who was with us in India initially, returned to his home country, a week before international flights were cancelled to and from India in March 2020.

Excerpts from a quarantine journal

January 31, 2020

Edgar's parents are in India now. The last couple of days have been brutal. But we are better today – his parents, Edgar, I – we're learning and unlearning things bit by bit.

We took a flight to Bagdogra this morning to get to Sikkim. At the border, while checking our permits, the security officer asked us if we'd been to China recently. No, we hadn't. What a weird question. Why would you want to know?

Apparently, there are people dying in some province in China of a flu-like/ pneumonia-like disease. Why is this news? Do you know how many people die every day of hunger in India? Of tuberculosis? Of rape? Of communal violence?

March 13, 2020

There's a virus in the air.

Somrita Urni Ganguly

It is a lot like love. A lot like language. Like love, like language, it too cannot stay confined to communities.

March 15, 2020

What is a body?

Identity? Creation? Procreation? Re-creation? Recreation? Confirmation?

Is a body also a date? A time? Space? A century? A year?

What questions is this year asking us?

March 17, 2020

We have been living in quarantine at home for three days now. The government has asked all schools, colleges, and universities to be suspended in our state. Shit has hit the ceiling. Edgar had to buy a ticket on Friday and leave for Germany on Saturday. Overnight. The world's battling a global pandemic. A novel coronavirus. And love in the time of corona feels like war. Love in the face of bureaucracy and government dictats feels like a revolution. Almost. There's a ban on all international non-essential travel. They are closing down airports. Edgar had to go back while there was still time. Over 4000 people have died in Italy. Iran, Spain, France, and UK are the worst hit after China and Italy.

When Edgar reached home, his mother called me up and said, my son has not hugged me since he returned. He's isolating himself for a while to keep us safe. What world are we living in? What is this virus?

I wanted to reach out to her and hug her. My heart was breaking. How hard must it be for a mother to see her son after so long and not be able to welcome him home with an embrace? I am sorry, René. I am so sorry that the world has turned into this unrecognisable place all of a sudden where we are struggling to make meaning of what is going on.

Habits are strange. Edgar stayed in our house in Calcutta for six months, occupying space, colouring the walls with his smile, his soft voice, his quiet, calming presence, his smell. He's gone now. There's a hollow again. Dad and I are back to our old routine. We cook for two and eat by ourselves. Dad reads the newspaper alone, watches the TV alone, writes his stories, checks Facebook on his phone. Out of 180 days that Edgar was here, we fought for about 30, if that. Sometimes I wanted him gone, sometimes I was mad at him. But now that he has left, the vacuum is unbearable. If we never meet again, Edgar, if this virus cancels out the entire world, if either of us dies, far away from each other, then, well, I guess I want to say that I am happy that I met you, despite our hard days and long nights. Thank you for loving me, and helping me love myself a little better. I love you.

You left your smell behind in this room two days ago. I closed the windows to trap it. It'll be gone tomorrow with the rising sun. But tonight, I shall wrap it around me like a blanket.

I went out with dad today to hoard food. We might have enough grains to see us through – for about a month or so. And vegetables and fruit enough for a week or two.

I'm willing to live on boiled pasta, boiled rice, boiled dal, boiled potatoes – if that's what it comes to. But I shall not let dad step out of the house after today.

This virus spreads if you come in contact with anyone affected. And affected people don't always know that they are carriers, and that they are transmitting the virus on

to others. How do you fight an enemy so stealthy? So unreachable? So dynamic?

While some patients have been tested for the virus in Calcutta, so far, all the results have been negative. I'm fortunate that I am rich. I didn't think I would ever have to say that out loud. But I really am fortunate that my parents have money, and that I have a high paying job which has given me leave for a couple of weeks, and it won't affect my pay at all. India is a country with 1,300,000,000 people – mostly poor, mostly daily wage earners, mostly farmers. What are they going to do?

My students in the university were rather upset when they heard that classes have been suspended for a couple of weeks. Upset? But isn't that an unfair reaction? I tried to help them understand why this kind of a suspension is important at this point in time. I don't think they are convinced. Some of them think the government is going overboard with its appeasement policies, so close to the elections. The "holiday" is a gimmick someone said, especially since there are no positive cases in our city, yet.

March 18, 2020

The elections have been postponed in Bengal.

And the first positive case was recorded in Calcutta today – an 18 year old boy: he seems to have returned from London, where he had danced the night away with his friend from Oxford University, before flying back to India. That girl tested positive. The boy tested positive too. He took a flight to Delhi from Heathrow. Then another flight to Calcutta. And got tested two days after landing in the city. What is this behavior? Why are people so selfish? With such little information on the virus, when the world leaders are suggesting that we go into lockdown, why would he be so callous? This virus is deadly because it spreads through contact. You touch someone who has it, you touch someone who touched someone who had it, you touch

something that was touched by someone who has it, and you're going to get it. You won't feel the symptoms until it's too late. About two weeks after contamination. And even then, you might mistake the symptoms for common cold, or allergies. By the time you realise it, there isn't much left to do. If you're old, or have a weak immune system, you're going to die. That's what it has come down to.

March 19, 2020

Case 2 in Calcutta. Another young man back from London.

Every reaction in my body feels like the ghost of a symptom now. The slightest cough. A wild sneeze. Every breath.

And we can't get tested. No one gets tested until it's too late, or until you have returned from an area strongly affected by the pandemic. How will I know? When will I know what I'm carrying in my body?

What is this way of living where I'm doubting my body every minute of the day?

March 20, 2020

Case 3. A woman back from Scotland.

Case 4. A 57-year old man with no travel history. Critical. In the isolation ICU now.

739 people died in Italy yesterday. I'll write that again. 739 in 24 hours.

How can I be sure that I don't already have it? How long will I live with this fear? When will they answer the fucking helpline numbers? I've been calling for two days now. Has nothing changed in this city? Is medical facility still available only to the

powerful? And I won't add the adjective 'rich' anymore. Money can't protect you in a medical crisis. The only thing that can save you from the corrupt healthcare system in this city of joy is political clout and power. You need to be big enough, important enough, to be saved. Has nothing changed? Nothing? Still the same dishonesty? Same hollow words? Empty promises? Why doesn't anyone answer the helpline?

March 21, 2020

This is it then.

Panic returned, that same old feeling, terrible, overwhelming. Panic returned and coursed through my body. I lay in bed, that familiar feeling of complete paralysis, the only outlet being my eyes. Tears wet my face, my pillow, as I stared at the rotating blades of the fan on the dark ceiling. What could I do? How could I save my father?

No one, they said, had any control over the virus. It came to kill. And it did. 11,000 people in the world so far. I've washed and washed and washed my hands until they're dry like jaundiced paper. But is it enough? When will it be enough? How will I know that it's enough? We are running out of food. The markets are closing. Some departmental stores are still open I hear. I wouldn't know. I am afraid to go out and check. What if I bring the virus back home? What if I kill dad? I'm afraid to purchase stocks online. What if the Amazon delivery person has the virus? How will I take the parcel from him? Where should I put it down in my house to unbox it? What if it unleashes the virus on my dad? What if I kill my dad?

I watched dog videos and old episodes of *Friends* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* from 8am until noon. It helped to numb the pain. Mindless things do help to take your mind off matters. Is this war?

How do you survive war? Maybe you don't. Some make it. Many don't. I've always

thought about how I would like to live in times that are historic. My mother's parents were freedom fighters. They fought alongside Netaji and Nehru and Gandhi to free India eighty years ago. My father's parents lived through the Partition of Bengal and the famine. My parents saw the Indo-China war. They witnessed Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi being assassinated. They saw the Babri Masjid getting demolished. I've always wanted to be a part of history – an intense, selfish, narcissistic desire to be remembered long after I'm gone.

Dad says this is history. If we make it out alive, if anyone makes it out alive, they'll talk, and read, and write about this pandemic years later. Like the plague in the 1920s. AIDS. H1N1. Ebola. Influenza. I have always wanted to do big things, contribute in big ways to the world. And here I am, sitting at home, quarantined, washing my hands like I have murder on them.

Such a crippling feeling.

March 22, 2020

If you die, they are going to put you in a big bag. Your family cannot come close enough to that bag. They cannot touch you. They cannot embrace you. They cannot kiss your cheeks. They cannot hold your fingers. They cannot sit next to you. You will be gone and they won't be able to sing you to sleep one last time. They will probably not even be able to see your dead body. Because they will probably be kept in isolation wards. If you die, you're going to die alone.

They're trying to stop the virus from spreading.

But it already has.

And there's no medicine yet. Even if they discover a vaccine today, they won't be able

to distribute it in the market before a year. They won't be able to control the virus until 2022.

I had so many plans for this year. A wedding. A few books. A few vacations.

But right now, I only want to keep dad alive. Everything else can wait, I guess.

7 positive cases in Calcutta.

March 23, 2020

I was trying to take a nap in the afternoon yesterday. I was woken up at five because of a cacophony outside. Our Prime Minister, in his emergency address to the nation, had asked citizens to stand on their balconies on March 22nd, at 5 pm, and clap their hands, or bang their plates, or ring their bells for five minutes as a gesture of gratitude to the soldiers on the frontline of this war – doctors, nurses, other medical and health professionals, sanitation workers. And at 5 pm my neighbours were out with their steel middle class bowls, plates, spoons, bells, and conch shells. What is this nation? I heard firecrackers go off in the distance. From the window in my kitchen I saw people walking in a small procession clapping their hands. We probably deserve this virus. We are too fucking stupid. Clap, clap, clap your hands, if you're happy and you know it, clap your fucking hands.

If the virus really, truly spreads in India, it'll turn into a landslide, a forest fire. It'll come like the waves of a tsunami and destroy us all. There are too many of us living in this country in too little space. Governments around the world have suggested that we self-quarantine; and if at all we go out into the world, then we practice social distancing – 3 feet away from people, no closer.

There is ZERO concept of personal space in a country like ours, with a population

like ours. There is hardly any civic sense AT ALL. People spit in front of your face. They sneeze on you without batting an eyelid. In trams, buses, metros, trains, in the market, in the school, at the workplace, everywhere, everywhere, TOO. MANY. PEOPLE. Too many fucking people breathing down your fucking neck. How can you talk of social distancing in a country like this?

Edgar might not be able to come back anytime soon. Even if he does, I might not be able to trust him to come close enough to me after a 24-hour long flight. I need to protect my father; I need to not transmit the virus to him.

What is this world? Had we taken too much for granted? Like skin on skin. Like the comfort of embraces.

Our city's gone into lockdown from yesterday. No trains, no buses, no metros. No restaurants, pubs, bars, theatres, shopping malls. No international flights to land or take off. My mother used to tell me of the Emergency in 1975. She didn't know Indira Gandhi was about to declare President's rule in the country. My mum was in the University. When she came out of her department, College Street was deserted. There was a lull in the air. She could smell the storm brewing. She walked back to her house on Ripon Street, as fast as she could. A stranger had given her a lift and helped her for a part of the journey. The skies were grey. The trees stood tall, their shadows on the ground were foreboding. She was probably 20 years old then.

This is the first time in my life that I've experienced a lockdown – not just in my city, but in 75 districts of the country, in innumerable countries around the world. The air smells of threat. The Taj Mahal has been shut down for the first time in 49 years.

There's a hush hush in the air. The breeze sounds like voices whispering in a library – the spring breeze, carrying death with it this year, instead of new life.

They've asked us to wash our hands for 20 seconds many, many times a day. They've asked us to use hand-sanitisers with at least 60% alcohol content. The market has

run out of masks and hand washes and sanitisers. And toilet paper.

Because that's how we are as humans. Our hubris wants us always to be in control. Hand sanitisers spell control. Soap spells control. Toilet paper spells control. We are a strange species.

How long can we stay in quarantine? Won't we run out of food? Who will be brave enough to go to the market then?

I am trying so hard to focus on writing my PhD thesis and editing my next manuscript. No words. Sterile. I can lie in bed for hours staring at the window. I can stand on the balcony and look out at nothing for several minutes. Or hours. No words. Very little energy.

Nights are the worst. When it rains. When there is a howling wind outside. When I hear doors slamming against their panes. I turn on the lights in my room, walk quietly to dad's room, and look at him from a distance, hiding behind his door, open just a sliver. He is mostly asleep. I wait to see his chest rise and fall rhythmically. I wait to confirm that he is still with me.

He is.

Nights are the worst.

10ams are much better. I hear my neighbours quarrelling, or screaming obscenities at each other in jest from their balconies, or singing their lungs out. I hear the fisherman selling fresh fish. I hear the vegetable-vendor selling his wares from his cart. I hear construction workers grilling away at the house next door – a new family is about to move in. It looks like business as usual. Almost.

Sometimes, I wonder at the stark difference between their reality and mine. On good days, the difference is very comforting. I feel that I am overreacting. I feel that my

fears are unfounded. That there is no lockdown in my city. Even if there's a curfew, it is temporary. Things are as they have always been. My neighbours prove it to me.

On bad days, however, the difference sends shivers down my spine. It stings like a hot grain of sand in my eye, scratching the surface raw. How are people going on with their daily chores as though the world were alright? As though the world wasn't dying? The sounds and smells and sights of everyday make me shudder. What should I do when it's time to come out of this quarantine? What will life look like on the other side of a lockdown? How many will make it? What if I make it? How will I keep myself from getting contaminated once we need to come out of our holes?

And then there are some nights that are worse than the others. I can't stop thinking of what ifs. What if this pandemic broke out last year, when I was in Nashville? Would dad have been safer without me? Who would help him get groceries online? And medicines? Who would teach him the WHO recommended hand washing techniques? I am a risk to him, but I think he wants to take that risk, and I think I want to take that risk too. We kill the people we love, don't we?

I am tired of feeling so worried all the fucking time. No rest. No respite. This constant anxiety. The nerves. The nerves are always on the edge. The slightest push and I fall over. My head is a beating drum. My body flushed with fear. My eyes swollen from crying too long, too much, too often. My hair a wild nest of foreboding.

If dad ever has to be put in quarantine at a hospital, how hard do I have to fight to be put in the same room with him?

Will I be able to convince the world that I really don't care if he transmits anything to me? That there's an urgent need in my blood to sit by him, holding his hand. Touch. Touch. Touch him.

I am sick of feeling scared. I am weary of both of us doubting ourselves because we don't want to hurt the other.

4 people out of 1 million are getting tested in India. At that rate how will we ever know how widely the virus has already spread in this country? For every 84,000 people, there is the provision for one isolation bed; for every 36,000, there is one quarantine bed. How will we make it? Who will get to claim that bed?

In Italy, they are about to make value judgements. People over 80, who test positive for Covid-19, will not be treated at the hospitals anymore. Because there are no beds. In short, they will be left on their own to die. So, we've already started deciding whose life is more important, whose isn't. We're playing god now, are we?

Italy's death toll has surpassed China's. What if everyone dies in Italy? What will become of the country? Will they wipe it off the map? You can cancel one event, or two, or three hundred. But can you cancel out a country? Can you cancel out a people? Can you cancel out a species? Will this virus be the end of the world as they've been predicting for some years now?

I hear, the Italian Prime Minister is one breath short of surrendering. I would give up too, I guess. What else can you do, but quit? How many people can you save from the sinking Titanic? There's an iceberg against you. There's a tsunami against you. There's a virus against you. Nature has a way of proving how insignificant human life is. I don't believe in god. Some people do. Why is god not helping them? What is this malignant, malicious god? How long can nations survive? How long will people survive?

They say, there are a lot of old people in Italy, and the young mingle with the old freely, with no hesitation, no reservations. And, therefore, today the old are dying.

Tragic.

I didn't think there would be an occasion during my lifetime to use that word. Sad? Yes. Sad. Pathetic. Heart-wrenching. Sorry. Pitiful. Sorrowful. Distressing. All the adjectives that you can line up – but tragic? I never thought I would have to use the

word tragic.

What would I do if I were the Prime Minister of Italy? What would I do if I were trying to save my people?

After a point, I guess you just look up at the sky and wait.

First death in Calcutta today. The 57-year old man who had tested positive for Covid-19 a couple of days ago. He might have traveled to Italy and initially withheld that information from the doctors. His son possibly lives in the US, his daughter-in-law is Italian. He might have come in contact with either or both, even if he hadn't traveled. He was in the hospital for seven days.

14,500 people dead so far in the world.

March 24, 2020

My hand smells like a hospital.

I am afraid to touch anything in the house. I don't want to kill my father.

Calcutta refused to cremate the first person that died in the city yesterday of Covid-19. His wife is in quarantine. What must she be going through? She couldn't bid him the final farewell. What must this pain be? This torture? Is she taking the markers of marriage off her body in quarantine? Is she rubbing the vermilion off the parting of her hair? Is she crying for a shoulder to rest on? Is she crying for someone to hold her? Will anyone hold her? Some kind nurse? Some stranger?

Neither the man's extended family, nor strangers wanted to have anything to do with the body. Hearses refused to carry the corpse. The crematorium refused to let it in. A mob gathered at the burning ghat. The Chief Minister had to step in. She said she'll

not permit this kind of indignity in death. She had to send police vans to escort the hearse that carried the body to the crematorium finally. I've not heard of this kind of a reaction to death in any, any, any other country. The CM has been a beacon of hope. She said she's going to provide rice for free to every poor family in Bengal for six months. She said that the homeless will be sheltered in deserted school buildings for now.

What if I die? Daddy is going to fight everyone in the world to touch me once – one last time, just once more. What will this city do to my father? When did we turn into these monsters? At what point in history? People scare me – the core, the hardened, rotten, irrational, selfish core of people scare the shit out of me.

The city has started selling bread, milk, and vegetables in the black market now. We got some from the black market through our usual supplier. We're all complicit in this. We are all guilty. We've all got blood on our hands.

What's all this washing going to do? The oceans will run out of clear water.

March 25, 2020

What is a virus, dad?

Where does it come from?

Why can't we kill all of them?

The Prime Minister has declared a nationwide curfew, starting today. And China has reported the death of a person from another kind of virus now – the Hanta virus. Can't lockdowns kill a virus, dad?

Somrita Urni Ganguly

March 26, 2020

“This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a

March 28, 2020

Let us fly away somewhere, daddy, away from this world. Is there nowhere we can go?

“The pity of war, the pity war distilled.”

In an embarrassing, interesting, and complete reversal of roles, I’m having to scold my dad these days for spending too much time on Facebook. I threatened to confiscate his phone yesterday. He said exactly what I used to say as a child, “Yes, please, take it away, and hide it so that I can’t find it. I have no self-control.”

I got my periods. And then learnt that all medical stores have run out of sanitary napkins. The government declared that the lockdown won’t affect essential services: healthcare, transportation to and from hospitals, fresh produce, grocery, and food. The list is limited, as it should be. However, guess what the list does not include as essential? The production and transportation of sanitary pads. Slow claps for the GOI. I shouldn’t have expected better though. In 2017, when this government introduced the GST – Goods and Services Taxes – essential items such as condoms were listed as tax-free. Sanitary napkins, on the other hand, were listed as luxury products and taxed at 12%. Activists had to protest for a year to have the tax scrapped. This is no country for women.

March 29, 2020

“Nothing happens, no one comes, no one goes, it’s awful.”

Fuck. Prince Charles of England has tested positive for the virus.

Marguerite Derrida, French psychoanalyst, who was married to Jacques Derrida until he died in 2004, tested positive too. She died last week in France. As did the Romanian writer Paul Goma. The Indian chef Floyd Cardoz. The Italian architect Vittorio Gregotti. Princess María Teresa of Spain. An American teenager who wasn’t treated by clinics in Los Angeles because he had no health insurance.

The 80-year old woman from down the street died yesterday. Of a stroke, not of the virus. What is it like for the family to lose someone in these times, not to these times but to other accidents? In a flash, I saw my entire childhood – ten years of it. Going to her house with mum, with dad, with both, eating the *luchis* that she made for me. She used to call me, Boori-ma. Tonight, of all nights, I can hear her voice calling out to me. I can see her bent, frail frame, and her gummy smile. How are her daughters going to take care of her funeral service in the midst of a lockdown?

Jair Bolsonaro tested positive for Covid-19. Boris Johnson. Prince Albert II of Monaco. At least 150 members of the royal family in Saudi Arabia. Tom Hanks. Idris Elba. Olga Kurylenko. Sophie Grégoire Trudeau. My friend Anna. Her husband Finnegan. My friend Harry. His 86-year old father. His 79-year old mother. A nine-month old baby in Calcutta, and twenty others.

The USA has the highest number of positive cases in the world now. 82,000.

What’s the point of these registers? They keep me rooted, when I seem to be losing ground bit by bit. These lists remind me that I’m not alone. And they remind me that

I might not be spared. Lessons in humility.

Doctors and nurses – the heroes on the battlefield – are writing out their wills. They do not know when the war will take them down. How long can you dodge a bullet?

Italy has set up beds with ventilator support systems or CPAP machines by roadsides. Spain has decided to take patients over 65 years of age off ventilators and free up the machines for younger people, who, the medical community feels, have a better chance of survival.

We're making monstrous choices, are we not?

Will they allow me to voluntarily give up my ventilator for my dad?

A woman was stuck in her house with the dead body of her husband for 30 hours. Her husband died of the virus. She screamed for help from the balcony. But Italy was under curfew, and no one could help her. Did she turn raving mad? Will she ever recover from that trauma? A dead body. A dead husband. Dead from a highly contagious disease. Stuck with her in their house. Did his ghost follow her to the washroom in the dead of the night every time she had to go in? Could she sleep a wink? What did she eat? Did she eat at all? Did she seat his body at the head of the table and make a plate for him as well? Was the house like a coffin, and she stuck inside with a corpse? Or did it smell like a mortuary?

What does it smell like inside a coffin?

If I were writing post-apocalyptic fiction now, or perhaps a novel, say *Love in the Time of Corona*, or *Women in Quarantine*, the novel would be writing itself by this point in time.

March 30, 2020

Somrita Urni Ganguly

Where are you headed?
Home.
Where's home?
800 kilometers from here.
How many?
800.
How will you get there?
We'll walk.
Do you have any food? Or milk for the two babies?
No. There's no money or food. We have some water in the bottles. That'll do for now.
Why didn't you stay back in Delhi? Why are you going back to your village?
There's no money to pay rent. We've been out of jobs for over a week.
So, you work in Delhi?
Yes, I'm a construction worker. I build homes.
There's no transport available. Are you sure you're going to walk all the way?
Do we have a choice? It's okay. We'll make it somehow.

I hope you do. I really hope you do.

Strange things have happened in the world over the last couple of weeks because of the virus. For instance, about 8,00,000 endangered Olive Ridley sea turtles have returned to the shores of Orissa for their nesting period. The ozone layer over Australia is showing some improvement. The ozone layer over the Arctic is showing a new hole. Air pollution levels have gone down. Incidents of domestic violence and child abuse have gone up. People have called on the government helpline number in Calcutta to ask for samosas and fish. The Chief Minister of Bengal has declared that sweetmeats and Bengali desserts are essential for our survival, and therefore, all

sweet-shops will remain open in Calcutta for four hours daily, starting today. The Supreme Court, for the first time in independent India, has asked jailors in the country to let set their prisoners free on bail or parole, after convicts broke out in mutiny in several prisons around the country, including the Central Jail in Dumdum, about half an hour away from our house. The apex court in Saudi Arabia has ruled that women may deny sexual overtures from their husbands during the pandemic. 51 Italian doctors tested positive for coronavirus. All 51 have died. But Prince Charles of England has recovered, and the 93-year-old Queen is safe. The city of New York is building makeshift morgues to hide the swelling bodies of the dead. They are also digging out mass graves outside the city. Is there space enough in the bosom of the world to accommodate so many coffins? The virus has reached the isolated Yanomani tribe living in the Amazon forests. Brazil has confirmed that a young indigenous boy has tested positive. Indian migrant workers have been smuggled across the country in milk-vans, so they can return to their villages. People have spat at the police in Calcutta for stopping them from going out during a curfew. Daily-wage earners have been walking back to Rajasthan from Gujarat, Delhi, and Madhya Pradesh after losing their jobs and having no means of transport to get back home during a nationwide lockdown. Twenty-two have already died on the way. But some have survived, and they are still walking. They've been stopped in places like Bareily by the government and people in hazmat suits have sprayed them with disinfectants that were being used to spray clean the roads of the country. The bleach and chlorine water might not kill those people, but the indignity of having to squat in a row on the streets on empty stomachs while the government tries to clean them up might. That is how we treat the underprivileged in the world's biggest democracy: as pestilence. But sometimes, despite all odds, I feel that our heart is still in the right place: the common people of this nation are trying to get food across to these migrant workers as they continue on their very long road home – packets of biscuits, bowls of dal, cooked rice, bananas, bottles of water, boxes of wafers. The nation is coming out of its quarantine in small groups, in small street corners, trying to help the hungry, giving them the little food that they can, while the Jeff Bezoses,

Amazons, and richest of rich of the world ask for monetary donations from the not-so-rich through pre-recorded messages from their fifty million dollar homes. Kim Kardashian's pantries and refrigerators in Hidden Hills have food enough for a city. The city of New York, on the other hand, is reeling with 100,000 positive cases so far. Italy's death toll has gone up to 10,700, and locals in Sicily have started raiding supermarkets for food. They've run out of money. They've run out of patience. They've run out of fucks to give. If the virus doesn't get us, hunger and starvation and the rich will.

27 dead in India from the virus, so far.
22 dead on the long march home.

Some people are beginning to learn that cooking is a basic survival skill and not a gender role. And that the poor aren't born to clean our sewage pipes and manholes and dirty dishes – they are compelled to.

March 31, 2020

Edgar has completed his fortnight of self-isolation. Dad and I also completed fourteen days today – we last stepped out of the house on March 17. I tried to make gnocchi for dinner tonight. Cooking does nothing for me. I thoroughly dislike it, I'm bad at it, and it's not one bit comforting. After that long prologue, I might as well put it on record that the gnocchi were awful.

Dad ate it without complaint. He'll eat anything I make for him – no questions asked.

And now I have a new fear. What if I hadn't washed my hands enough? What if that stealthy, insidious, creepy, killer virus was lurking somewhere on my hands? What if my overboiled, disgusting gnocchi kills dad? We always kill the people we love, don't we?

Somrita Urni Ganguly

I shan't cook again – I swear, I won't. Please get through this gnocchi without incident, Dad. Please.

My mother would have laughed and quoted Shakespeare. She always quoted Shakespeare. The fault is not in our stars, dear Brutus, but in ourselves, that we are underlings. Cowards die many times before their death, the valiant never tastes of death but once.

April 1, 2020

"For Ezra Pound:

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain."

For Anna Hartman:

I met Anna two Aprils ago, when I moved to Nashville. Justin introduced me to her, as he has introduced me to so many wonderful people over the years. I know Justin since 2017, we met at the Frankfurt Book Fair, and then bonded over sparkling water, tuna sandwiches, and Urdu poetry in the afternoon, and German beer, Lebanese shawarmas, and middle-eastern music that night. Justin had studied Urdu in Lucknow many years ago. He now teaches Urdu in America. He told me about his student, Anna, who had completed a PhD in the classics, and was studying to become a literary translator.

Anna, and her husband, Finnegan, had me over one night. I was two months old in

Nashville then and grateful for their friendship. They cooked Mejadra for me, following Sami Tamimi and Yotam Ottolenghi's recipe from their cookbook, *Jerusalem*. They added fried pork sausages to the rice and lentil dish: their homely addition to such a brilliant, humble recipe. We shared stories, cheese, a bottle of red wine, laughter, and glasses of Negroni in the warmth of their beautiful two storied house. Anna dropped me home that night. We promised to meet soon again. We didn't. She left for Italy, then Spain. I returned to India.

When I learnt that Anna and Finn had tested positive for Covid-19, the threat of the virus suddenly became more tangible than before. It was no longer something that people talked about in the distance, it was real. People that I knew intimately had tested positive for it.

Anna and Finn are recovering now, slowly, but surely. There are things she has told me about her journey with the virus. Who would look after her children? Would she ever get better? She wrote of the burning fever and the chills. She wrote of the fear and the confusion. She was one of the first people to test positive in her city. But she said something very unusual yesterday. "When I'm better, I want to volunteer at hospitals. They say, if I recover, my immunity will be strong enough to fight off the virus henceforth. I won't need any further protection. I want to go to the hospitals and the isolation wards and help people there." She told me of the help that she received from those around her: bowls of soup, batches of hot cookies, fresh loaves of bread, all left at her doorstep silently, without hesitation, without fear, without ceremony.

Our city refused to bury its dead. Her city brought her food and hope. "The last few weeks have taught me that while the sustenance is important in itself," Anna said, "an offering on your doorstep is more than just food. It is a visible rendering of the rope that connects us to one another, the rope that stabilizes our lonely ships and gives us — singly and collectively — the courage to wait out this storm."

Get well soon, Anna.

And pray for my city, as we sit in our houses, fearing each other, looking at our neighbours with suspicion, demonising the sick, stocking our refrigerators with grapes and kiwis and oranges and bananas and cucumbers and tomatoes, and leaving the poor to die on the roads.

May we learn compassion. May we heal together.

April 2, 2020

My salary got credited to my bank account today, Viola. How's the government managing? Maybe the government has enough money to ride through for another six months or more. I'll donate my salary for the month to the State Relief Fund tomorrow. I heard some business tycoon has promised to give the Prime Minister 15,000,000,000 rupees. I don't understand such big numbers. Too much for me.

Let the guys who have it, give it, Rose.

What if the world runs out of money someday, Viola? Can the world run out of money some day? What will we barter then for food? Poetry? I don't think I have any skills to offer to the world. How will I survive?

Maybe money as a concept will lose footing for a while, Rose. Relax. We'll worry about it when we have to cross that bridge.

April 11, 2020

Slavoj Žižek has a new book on the pandemic, non-fiction: *Pandemic! COVID-19*

Shakes the World.

Siddhartha Gigoo has a new book coming out next week, fiction: *Love in the time of Quarantine.*

Not going to read either.

Who are their publishers?

I want to read of the mafia in Italy that are helping out people in quarantine with food.

And of the thieves that stole a Van Gogh from a Dutch museum in the wee hours of dawn during a lockdown.

Give me no more theories. Give me no more second-rate romances. The libraries of the world are full of such yellowing paper.

May 7, 2020

The numbers will only increase from here. People will turn into memories and ghosts. Places which were synonyms of love will begin to haunt.

Riya's father and Viola's aunt tested positive. Mum's friend, Anjali, died.

We are still alive.

The way to live a war is from a distance, vicariously, through other people. Especially, for writers. Selfish, self-centered saviours of the world, menders of broken hearts.

Hospitals in Calcutta have run out of quarantine beds. We'll soon be on our own, left

to die where we are.

It's hard to stay calm. This isn't happening to me. Not yet. I am safe. My father is safe. We are in the house. We talk about his college days and his dorm mates, and his childhood crushes, and his love for mum for hours over dinner. We are okay. But it takes time for me to explain to my brain that it's Riya's father who's in the hospital now. We are still at home.

What is this paranoia? Riya asked me if I will ever meet her again. The world is speaking in a language that is beyond my vocabulary. I am searching every day to translate these new idioms for my brain to register. But I feel lonely and helpless.

Preview-Picture by Katharina Sabernig. She creates, knits and photographs medicinal objects to make medical content accessible to the senses (https://www.knitted-anatomy.at/).