



CO(R)VID MOON



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*This poetry pamphlet is for my patrons
who have supported me through the COVID-19 pandemic.*

*It is dedicated to all who have died from this plague
and to all who have helped the living stay alive.*

*I was there
when the warriors
of Britain were slain,*

*when ravens
croaked on gore,*

*when ravens
croaked on flesh,*

when battle-ravens croaked.'

Lines adapted from 'The Conversation of Gwyn ap Nudd and Gwyddno Garanhir'

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The Summoning of the Ravens

It is not we who summon but the ravens.

You will know it by the moment the sky goes out
to the croak of their calls like the blinking of a god's eyelid.

Do not ignore the momentary shadow of their four-fingered wings.

The casting of doubt on everything is only the beginning.

I have seen ravens on Dumbarton Rock, the Great Orme,
Pen Dinas, but never expected to see them here
in Peneverdant shuddering out the skies.

“Who” and “what” and “why?” I cry
in this wilderness of lockdown, try to interpret
their unconquerable calls and their potent messages.

Every time I find words the ravens shift further out of sight.

To Earn your Raven

“To earn your raven
you must become wise.

This might come as a surprise
but I don't want one of your eyes
and neither do the giants or the ravens.

And, not yet, do I want your soul...

There is wisdom in sacrifice
but also in the joys in life.

Use your eyes and the clearsight
I have gifted you to see into the souls
of things, return my gift in poetry

and you will truly learn to see

and from the darkness of unsight
will come a black hooded bird

with the moon in her claws.”

If I Could Whisper

If I was a raven on your shoulder,
if I was to land there silently, touch my beak
to your ear and whisper anything what would it be?

If I was to tell you how I have travelled the world,
reported the excess deaths before they hit the screen
in maps and charts and multi-coloured numerals

would you drum fingers that have never crunched
numbers on the arms of your throne, the knuckles pale
and blood-stained, glance at your scythe, propped in the corner,
leaning slightly like an old friend at the bar say:

“Tell me something that I don’t know?”

If I was to tell you how I have travelled the world,
reported the latest news from the so-called secret places:
centrifuges in Iran, covid amok on an Antarctic research station
whilst scientists search for immunological dark matter,

and riots rock the Whitehouse in the bright eye of day

would you glance at your feet, clad in black leather boots,
worn and weary, carrying their tale of your footsteps

in all these places, speaking nothing of your role say:

“Tell me something that I don’t know?”

If I was tell you how I travelled the world,
reported the secrets of the scientists - spoke of
how the zombie fungus causes ants to climb to the summit
of leaves and grip on before the mushroom sprouts from their heads,

of flatworms known as planarians who are ‘immortal beneath the knife’,
of tardigrades in space and invisible bacteria who change the atmosphere,
of this virus which is working such profound changes on our lives

would you give a shrug that does not belong in a lab coat say:

“Tell me something that I don’t know?”

If I was to turn from my travels and tell you instead
the innermost secrets of my raven’s heart, of all the corpses
I have pecked apart, not least of all my own, and what I found there,
squirming, iridescent, the things I recognised as me and those as not,

(for I am not only part human, part raven, but part microorganism
and in spite of our inner battles we together defend against the virus),

if I was to struggle to form the words that roll not easily but perfectly
from my raven’s tongue and tell you that “I love you my god,”

would the set of your jaw soften for a moment as you say:

“Tell me something that I don’t know?”

A Raven has a Job Interview

“Tell me, raven, what qualities make you a good candidate for this role?”

“My great black wings, the sharpness of my beak, my love of flying between worlds. My legendary wit and cleverness. My ability to find shiny and unshiny things. My incredible memory and the comforting and uncomforting sounds of my words. The unfathomable darkness, greatness, ultimately the kindness of my heart.”

“Can you give me examples of when you have worked alone and in a team?”

“Alone I fly, ever onwards, dark eyes swivelling like planets in their orbits, searching for the corpses of the dead but, alone, I cannot open them, peck them apart, so I call to the wolves and they come howling with their stronger muzzles to lay open the wet flesh, the steaming jewels of the innards, and I call my sisters to feast.”

“And, finally, can you tell me what rewards you expect to get out of the job?”

“Well I would be lying if I didn’t admit it was the eyes – the colours of the irises, the beautiful fragility of their dying light, their exquisite taste, the softness of corpses. The magic in the moment a soul flies free. The prestige of flying with Gwyn ap Nudd. Yet, in all honesty, what drew me to this job was the promise of immortality.”

Covid Baby

It's hours since I carried this pain inside me all the way down the old pilgrim's path to where the well has sprung to life, just for this occasion, just for me and this burden I bear, as she said. I slither into the pool and wait for moonrise. Through the bare boughs I see the moon, shrouded by clouds, shining, hiding, in her effervescent game of hide-and-seek with the black sky-dragons. As black shadows cross the full moon, black-winged deaths in their shrouds, I feel a snag like a beak snapping a twig and the dam is undone, the release of the flood waters, the moon's surging tides. I howl, I shriek, I feel as if I'm giving birth to the moon, huge, bright, unforgiving. My clouds rend. I do not know if the claws belong to the demon child or the demon midwife who I met so long ago when I was taken beyond the rivers, the canals, the cuts, the rivers of blood, to the fortress where I delivered a child and somehow conceived my own and she said she would be here for him. And so she is, in her black feathers, relieving me of my final agony, holding the babe up to the moonlight. When I see his face, like a moon, and the spikes on his forehead where infant curls should be I realise I have given birth to something uncanny and unstoppable before I slip into the waters.

Full Moon

I.

The cauldron
is kindled
by the breath

of nine ravens -

each wears a moon
on her forehead

and black wings,

sings to the reflection
of the white orb.

II.

Slowly approaching
dragging black wings
is it Annwn's King?

Black feathers falling?

Are they his daughters,
beloveds or queens?

III.

Why do they conjure
the moon – is it for him?

Is she his only guidance?

Who else could guide
the guide of the dead?

A Raven Carries

the full moon in her beak

or is it a white blood cell – a stolen piece of me?

I see the sky is filled with ravens carrying little moons,
carrying pieces of me away and there are billions of them
because the body produces 10 billion white blood cells a day.

The sky is white with moons and black with raven's wings.

I wonder if I am alive or dead or somewhere in between.

Are there islands of the dead for dead leukocytes
or do they long instead for another body and plasma?

Will they head for my co-walker and her horse and hounds
and settle like expected guests into her ectoplasm

or wing away to some otherworldly graveyard
where upon each stone is a small engraving
in a language only cells can speak?

In Praise of the Macrophage

There are miracles happening within us
every minute, every hour, every day.

Take this macrophage – ‘big eater’.

(I should warn you the poetry of the body
is mostly written in Latin or Greek).

Take this phagocyte – an ‘eating cell’.

Witness phagocytosis as it engulfs
a particle of coronavirus, takes it within,
and in the vacuum of its phagosome

with cytotoxins brings its life to end,

processes the broken parts, shaking them up
like a snow globe, presents its antigen

to the T-cells and B-cells who finish the job.

Watch how it cleans up afterwards eating
the viral and bodily dead before its death.

There are miracles happening within us,
millions of macrophages in millions of bodies
across the world doing their hidden work -
a blessing, a gift of the gods, we share.

Praise to the macrophage - to the ‘big eater’.
Praise to the death-eaters and their gods.
Praise to the miracles of gods unseen.

Haematopoiesis

This tonight is the poetry of the body.
This tonight is the poetry of the blood.
This tonight is the poetry of the bones,

of bone marrow giving birth to billions
of blood cells every day – leukocytes (B cells
and T cells) and granulocytes: monocytes,
neutrophils, eosinophils, and basophils

who guard our bodies against this plague

and erythrocytes who bring breath to blood.

Tonight I realise why our ancient ancestors
ate the bone marrow of their predecessors.

I see that this is where poetry is formed.

A Question for the Modern Shapeshifters

I pose a question to all you shapeshifters -

druids, bards, awenyddion, all you wannabe Taliesins.

If you can be a stag, a dog, a bird, a fish, a bee, if it is possible to be a microorganism, and, let's not beat around the bush here, get to the point,

a coronavirus – specifically SARS-CoV-2 – why have you not slipped beneath its protein skin? Solved the mysteries of its mutations?

Instead left it to the scientists to identify D614G, K417N

N501Y, H69/V70 deletions in B117, B1351, E484K?

Why have you alchemists not made a vaccine?

Are you afraid of the monsters of Annwn?

Is this tiny little thing too big a beast ? Out of your league?

Or are we waiting for your poems and prophecies?

To hear the viral songs of COVID-19?

Funeral Plan

The raven is back on her windowsill again.

“Well have you done it?” it asks.

“Done what?”

“You know.”

“I know what you want and no...
gone are the days of excarnation.
My family have refused point blank
to lay me out on the kitchen table
in the garden as food for ravens,

when you have pecked me clean
to commend my soul to the eaters
of the dead and to store my bones
in tupperware boxes in the cellar.

I am instead to be food for worms.”

The raven croaks, shakes its head,
and does a ridiculous corvid dance.

“However, the laws for the body
in this world to do not apply to the soul.
You shall find, written in the small print,
with a black quill from a raven’s feather,
in black ink from a shaggy ink cap,

the words of an agreement between
you and I and the Lord of the Otherworld.”

Her Body a Battlefield

Her flesh is a mass of shivers.
Her heaving chest is a rack of coughs.
When I travel within I see the invading armies
in their spiked helmets, spinning like morning stars,
have breached the linings of nose, mouth, throat,
headed down the trachea to the lungs.

They have penetrated the cell walls
and seized the replication mechanism,
made each cell a breeding ground.

They have fended off the macrophages,
escaped being swallowed (left a detritus of pus),
but the chase is on for here come the B-cells
wielding the shurikens of their antibodies,

the T-cells with their binding death-grip
and their chemical weapons and programmes
instructing infected cells to self-destruct.

In the lungs is a mayhem of bursting cells.

In the flood waters a raven fears to drown.

Yet I set to carrying the dead cells away.

Taking her, bit by bit, to a faraway land.
Will she will be mine, tonight, tomorrow,
in a week of tomorrows, or will she live?

Alive or Dead?

On my journey
I arrest a particle
of the virus say:

“If you do not
come alive I will
take you dead.”

The virion laughs.

“I do not fit into
your definitions

oh so limited by
whether we can replicate
without our host.

We cannot yet we are,
have always been between
words, hosts, worlds.

You may take me
yet we will slip forever
from your claws.”

Dying Alone

I don't know who you are
but I don't want you to die alone.
If there is no nurse to hold the phone,
or no-one left at the end of the line
in a world that feels so distant
I will go to the otherside
and bring your loved ones
to stand in circle beside your bed,
through the ceremony of your last hours
as you breathe your final breath.

You will not see me – your raven
until I take you under my wing to fly
to where phone lines do not reach.

To where there is no loneliness
or distance on Annwn's sandy beach.

Nurse

I don't know
why I'm surprised
to see the nurse

psychopomping the souls.

She's barely out of her teens,
curly ginger hair tied back
with a white elasticated bobble,
wearing the blues of her scrub
top and trousers so easily

she's so... normal... she's

guiding them so gently
with a kind word or a touch
to the hand so naturally,

whereas I am no good
with the living or the dead.

“You could never be a nurse.”

So many times I've heard it said.

I hover in the darkness, to her
I bow my raven's head.

The Farewell

The ship is tall, leaning. Its only crew are black-winged figures working the rigging, gathering in the swollen storm-filled sails, tying and untying the knots with black beaks.

On its prow stands Barinthus, the helmsman, dark-cloaked, stern, implacable. No-one sees if his lips move beneath the shadows of his hood as he reads out the roll call: names of Londoners, Devonians, Bristolians, Scousers, Mancunians, Lancastrians, Glaswegians, Brummies, whose accents mix in the huge make-shift camp grown up in the marshy hinterland between the worlds.

They're mostly old. Veteran souls move between them, boiling tea on stoves that burn no gas. They drink from metal cups, pull blankets around them, attempt to recall to one another their stories.

Some are funny – drunken exploits – other people's knickers and roundabouts. Some are tragic – motorcycle crashes, the loss of daughters and sons, spouses who lost their memory yet lived on.

“How did we get here?” Few recall that journey or what brought them.

White hounds with red markings on their ears, noses, and tips of their tails, patrol the edges of the camp. If anyone tries to leave they are there. A grin and friendly growl is always enough. The pups like to play amongst the child souls, tongues lolling, letting their bellies be rubbed. When their master calls them, not liking them to get attached, they leave whining with their tails between their legs.

“Where are we going?” Few recall the journey they have made so many times before.

“The biggest shipload since the last war,” my god's voice from where he stands invisible so as not to frighten the souls.

Their leaving seems to take forever, one by one getting up from their camp stools, boarding across a wobbly plank and taking their places in the cabins, more cabins-worth of souls than there are cabins on board?

“The number of cabins, the space of the hold, the expanses of the deck, are limitless, infinitesimal,” Gwyn informs me. Speaking ominously, “no matter how many passengers the ship is never full.”

I watch with Gwyn as the camp fires go out and the ship sinks deeper and deeper into the waters.

As a raven flies down, with a practised snap of her black beak severs the mooring rope I clasp my hands, bow my head in mourning, say farewell to over a thousand Britons who I never knew.

As I leave, dropping a tea bag in a pot for the next souls, I see them already beginning to arrive. Some are escorted by their ancestors, others by the hounds, others by black birds with drooping wings. A little boy is carrying a white red-spotted hamster wrapped up in his school blazer.

Their numbers are endless.

A Raven in the Vaccination Centre

You may be surprised to see me working in a vaccination centre, but I will have you know that if I can get employed by Gwyn ap Nudd I can walk into any job, and I have to go where the work is. This vaccine could well put a stop to this plague, and I've got to say, a year in, I'm getting more than a little tired of this coronavirus and am fully prepared to bear the very last virion to Annwn's depths.

Only if you look closely will you recognise me holding the needle. Catch a glimpse of my dark gaze from above my masked beak or see the occasional feather untucking from my PPE. I am incredibly polite, follow all the right checks, make sure the dilution of the vaccine and the dosage are correct.

Only once have I been questioned about my motives – whether I want the people of Britain dead or sterile. “Neither,” I replied, “for, what, then, would the ravens eat?” Not the response I had been taught, but it seemed to put the citizen at ease for he sat still as I drew up the vaccine and primed the needle.

What has Van Gogh got to do with Covid?

His is the landscape of madness.

Across his crow fields and starry starry night
corvids fly delivering the dead to a place made by art -

funereal cypresses, the morning star, the waning gibbous moon
larger than life – he was always “reaching for stars that are too big.”

He had an ear for ravens and knew “we take death to reach a star.”

He did not know of covid, but he knew the journey beyond

and how we would need art like we need corvids
to guide us through the immensity of night.

A Raven Imagines Life After the Pandemic

“Tell me, when this all over, will I be made redundant?
Will there be no battles within, no battles without,
no big deaths, no little deaths? Will there be... peace?”

The raven rolls that last word peculiarly on its tongue.

The Gatherer of Souls, unable to speak it, shakes his head.

“Raven, look to your imagination, tell me what you see.”

“I see a time when ravens outnumber the clouds landing
on the crumbling edifices of cathedrals and tower blocks
perching like gargoyles a time when the faces of ravens
are carved on cliff faces and the giants build new circles
of stone and stone tables where again are laid the dead.

Celebrations take place in the open air where we swoop.

There is kindness here, and brutality, the people continue
to fight and fuck, but bow their knees again to the gods.

In the wheat fields there is not a single scarecrow.

In my mind’s eye there will always be food for ravens.”