

Out Of The Iron Lung

A Miasma Theory Of Coronavirus

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I have often suspected, that there may be in the Air some yet more latent Qualities or Powers differing enough from all these, and principally due to the Substantial Parts or Ingredients, whereof it consist

For this is not as many imagine a simple and elementary body, but a confused aggregate of 'effluvioms' from such differing bodies, that, though they all agree in constituting by their minuteness and various motions one great mass of fluid matter, yet perhaps there is scarce a more heterogeneous body in the world."

– Robert Boyle, Suspicions About The Hidden Realities of the Air

They say: 'we will return to the new normal.' This is a blank cheque, a license to impose whatever conditions they choose.

The first wind's approach is imperceptible, as is the way of winds. None of the townsfolk can recall when it started blowing and its arrival is heralded only by the merest alteration in the dances of dust-motes and the faintest susurrus in the smoke of the cooking fires. In time it grows to a tempest of infernal velocity, propelling dust-motes at such speed they scour flesh to the bone and spreading sparks from the cooking fires to scorch the four green corners of the earth. Nonetheless, the townsfolk scarcely notice its presence, so steadily did it begin to blow. Asked why their limbs are bleeding and their crops burned, they shrug and say: it must have always been this way.

How quickly this pandemic has caused so many things to go out of the window. Left shibboleths are abandoned, some deploying irony to ease the guilt they feel at defenestrating hope from the Overton window. Stalwart anarchists joke about calling the cops on community members incapable of following the woolly yet cast-iron strictures of the new normal. For the liberals, eternal return and World Cup repeats on the telly: for radicals, the melancholy blanket of humor, which distances as it comforts.

Woolly for the elite who spread this disease, jet-setting and handshaking and conveying freight across oceans: cast-iron for streetwalkers, day-laborers and the coming wave of looters. Expect to be shot dead, to be dragged wailing from the graveside, to be handed the cardboard box of ashes.

All laws semi-permeable membranes, to be transgressed in one direction only.

The second wind, good and golden, is summoned by stately country dances to keep the bad and bitter away. These quadrilles, the voodoo steps of which were imputed to the townsfolk by a charlatan jongleur for no greater price than a slop of stewed tubers and a sack on which to lay his head, are sworn to conjure vitalising jetstreams from the verdant south to impregnate the land with green life. And indeed they do, the fields are emerald and glisten wetly, the pumpkins groan at the seams, a pungent stench of loam pervades the town. It is too much: an undernote of dung crescendos in the nose: countless caterpillars wriggle over unattended infants: the pumpkins burst and rot below an unrelenting hot-house sky. Gagging in the swampy heat, the townsfolk beg the balladeer to teach them the counter-clockwise choreography which will undo all these things and restore the sharp familiar breezes which cut over the pastures before. But he will not relent, not for gold nor high office nor the promised caresses of milkmaids, not until every last grain of the harvest has been handed over in tribute will he finally undo his mischief and depart in a harlequin swirl, leaving the townsfolk destitute and eating one another among the fly-blown fields.

To say 'the new normal' implies that where we before was something other than a gross abnormality. It stakes out a semi-permeable membrane, which we have crossed and may not return.

When the forces of reaction are infinitely and inevitably stronger than any action we the people may take, can they still be thus named? Had we not better humble ourselves by exchanging the terms, and admit it is we who react?

The third wind sets the church bells pealing on All Hallow's Eve, and freezes the clappers to the crowns on Easter Day. It is the evil shadow of the blue sky and the corn-coloured sun, without brightness, without form, a violent action without source or mass. What the sun raises, it withers: what the sky smiles upon, it scrapes bare. The townsfolk recognize this perversity as the true nature of all winds, and have the priest expel every last one from the town. The atmosphere is dead and motionless and at last the townsfolk can breathe in peace. Patting one another's backs they gratefully exhale, and find they cannot draw in clean air. Jackdaws and swallows plunge to earth and break their necks, and the clouds start to come down on the high meadows in titanic, petrified clots, spatchcocking cattle, raising mushroom-clouds of spoiled grain. Gagging, tearing at their constricted throats, hating themselves for what they do, the townsfolk seize the frail and the sickly and those not of good home and trample the breath from their lungs. A meagre vintage of consumptive air is bruised out and they fall to their knees and lap at it gratefully, fanning the feeble breezes over brows stinking with sweat.

They call it a pandemic, and it is. But better to define *pan-* by metrics other than mere geography. There is more that unites Bolsanaro and Johnson than there is uniting, say, Mohammad Mirmohammadi with the unnamed Kurds body-bagged in western Iran, which is eastern Kurdistan in all but reality.

The World Health Organization has sagely observed that corona does not recognize lines of conflict, and that is true, but it surely recognizes trade routes between tax havens. In its blindness the virus ignores the lines we draw on the earth, is funneled precisely through the spaces we create in the air for the flow of capital. Corona has spread unevenly, globally, and were the viral bodies to glow bright they would expose the logic and pattern of ceaseless expansion.

Already, the pandemic has begun to metastasize and find frailer subjects to consume in Cox's Bazaar, al-Hawl and Moria, and it will continue to do so long after the world system has righted itself with force. In its end as its beginning, it is the people who will die.

But corona is definable as pandemic because of the capitalist class, not only in the sense that it has found epicentres among that class as well as among the wretched of the earth, but also because without that class and what it is doing to the world the virus could not have so spread.

To say this, of course, is to commit the crime of ‘politicizing a tragedy’. Which is to say, the crime of saying: ‘this is not normal.’

The fourth wind overtakes itself, lifting leaves and litter long before its chill is felt on the face. Though the surface of the millpond is not wrinkled by the breeze, a wicked old woman with a pustular growth down her neck is tumbled into it and drowned. Though the heads of corn do not waver in the fields, the hayrick is tumbled onto swains as they copulate in its shadow and breaks their sinful bones. Unable to make out the origin of these mischiefs, the townsfolk ascribe them to wizardry or the malice of ghosts. When the gentle kiss of the wind is finally felt by the burghers and goodwives leaving chapel on a Sunday afternoon, those few who correlate it to the shepherd-boys now buried in unmarked graves among the furloughs or the grandmother left to decompose among the roots of the bulrushes are themselves called mad and frogmarched to the pond for trial by ducking in its blameless clear waters and interment thereafter somewhere deep in the fields.

We must take this virus seriously. We must also continue to take seriously all those things we took seriously before.

At the extreme limit we should properly be seeking to contain this disease among the Bolsonaros and the Johnsons of this world, to turn it against them. We the working people of the world have every right to turn our backs and close our doors (on them and them alone!) and let it rage out in the private air-lounges and fascist meet-and-greets.

But what we say of our own struggles – that capital will always seek to consume and co-opt them – is no less true of the response to this disease. Even now, capitalist states use the virus to impose new excesses and justify the old, imposing the ‘new normal’ for the people even as they insist that the old normal must hold for the system.

And so the left are once again left behind, on the back foot, providing palliatives for terminal ills.

We must return from sentimentality to humanity. To do so, we must take paths through ancient thickets long thought impermeable.

We must go back, and arrive further ahead than when we started.

The fifth wind brings relief from the steady damp heat of the tropics. Known to the townsfolk as ‘the doctor’ for its restorative properties, it is venerated just as any medicine-man is venerated, with profound suspicion and fear. That which seeds the crops may strip their budding fruits away; that which sweeps away pallor and disease may keep blowing until all else is lost. Accordingly the townsfolk curse it, stamping their feet and shaking their fists and spitting into the air. In this way they are restored and made grateful for the damp stillness that was before, and the doctor continues on its lonely way around the earth, re+juvenating each town it comes to and so finding a home in none.

The liberal ‘resistance’ mocks at the snake-oil salesmen though of course they have been snake-oiled all along, suckered into believing that the system which bred this sickness can heal it. Their call is that the states should be doing more and more competently, as though it is not the endless, wretched drive for competency which brought us to this end. As though it were not these margins which necessitate the immiseration of human capital.

It is globalized capital which is the sticking-plaster and the so-called sticking-plasters – mutual aid whatsapp groups, degrowth, global democratic confederalism – which must replace it. See how quickly the just-in-time deliveries of medicine and groceries fail, how rapidly the airlines that have been fattening this past half-century need bailouts to stay afloat. This was never a serious or permanent solution.

The sixth wind catches its own tail, coming upon itself at the point of its inception over the waters, and so impelling itself onward at greater velocities to more distant climes. Its strength seems infinite, drawing power from its own power as it catches itself over and over, swallows itself, is blown apart in each and every direction, until the original velocity and vector of its passage is no more chartable than the dance of the stars. Blowing everywhere at once, it might as well not blow at all. Its name slips into disuse and even the mariners forget its power.

They would have you believe that the margin between closing all the borders and imposing martial law on the one hand and surrendering all control to the diktats of ailing UN technocrats on the other is impossibly thin. In fact, green gardens and mutual aid abound in it.

“Science, science, science,” the guardians of the old order cry. So let them have it. There are more sciences in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in their philosophy.

The seventh wind comes down suddenly from the mountains, unlooked for and not spoken of by the wise-women or the bards. It strips the fruit from the vine, scorches the earth and freezes the cattle. The townsfolk quiver, for they know they will starve, and crucify their bards on the highest stripped boughs and drive their wise-women into the blasted meadows to await their fate. But wait: the wise-women are returning with rare truffles previously obscured by the gross green marrows, with rich-bodied invertebrates plucked from the overturned earth, with sweet wine distilled from the spoiled crop of grapes. Such a feast is prepared as was never before tasted, and the townsfolk rejoice. The crucified bards wink at the wind as it passes from the land, recognizing it as one of their own.

When we say that science is as real and unreal as myth, what we mean is that for all practical purposes we all still live as though the universe were 6000 years old and created for us to dwell in. We cannot bear it otherwise, and the denotation of corona as pandemic is testament to that. And so it becomes a question of which snake-oil is best to live one’s life by. The liberal fantasy is that the laws of reason and science will stabilize the system, install technocrats where necessary, get the job done. This is snake-oil but it appeals greatly, and it can be tasted on the lips of Labour Party apparatchniks calling on the British government to do more, mocking Boris Johnson for not washing his hands. When did we become the nannies of the nanny state? Not far from here, surely, to calling the cops on joggers.

Rather, the snake-oil most fitting to our times is that old quackery which holds foul effluvia rise from the foul places of the earth – swamps, ghettos, wet markets – and are wafted around by the motion of air, with any close at hand at risk of contagion.

By all means wash your hands. But it is not the physical contact between loved ones which has caused the spread of this virus any more than the unthinking genetic twitch of the virus is itself to blame. It is the disturbance of the very substance of the earth and sky and ocean, the containment of labour and labourers into certain stinking places which birthed this disease and the concomitant whirl of shipping-containers and trade winds which funneled it precisely back into the heart of empire. Bad winds, night air, raised by the black magic of just-in-time delivery.

Thus we are freed from the sterile pettiness of social distancing and personal hygiene, from individual culpability for systemic failure. Thus we are burdened with the challenge of building a hygienic, spacious, caring society, in and around the old.

The eighth wind seems to emanate from every point of the compass rose, chilling the skin, raising the hairs on one's head. The townsfolk go to the north to seek for its source and do not find it, and the south thereafter, the west, the east. In time they realize it must come from within, and that the thorn stockade they raised around the town and the furs they wrapped themselves in have only trapped the icy wind inside. Now they know this it no longer seems fearful, and they strip naked and burn their fences and are dead of hypochondria before the last ember grows cold.

Of course, we cannot take miasma theory just as it was, bound up with the fear of the mob, the unwashed, the filthy. We must go back, and arrive further forward than where we started.

The sick have sometimes spoken of how necessary it is to be sick, how it constitutes a refusal of the unasked-for burden of labour. We should not cast aside our defiant wretchedness in the face of the pandemic. Rather, we should see this as the greatest test and opportunity of such a stance.

If 80% of the world is to fall ill, had we not better exchange the terms, and admit that it is the world which is sick?

“Once we are all ill and confined to the bed, sharing our stories of therapies and comforts, forming support groups, bearing witness to each other's tales of trauma, prioritizing the care and love of our sick, pained, expensive, sensitive, fantastic bodies, and there is no one left to go to work, perhaps then, finally, capitalism will screech to its much-needed, long-overdue, and motherfucking glorious halt,” writes Johanna Hedva. She notes that chronic disease encompasses lifetimes and so all of time – *chronos* – defying the capitalist demand that sickness be a temporary abrogation in the toil of *homo economicus*. So what of the acute condition, only a needlepoint – *acus* – in space and time?

How Can We Stitch Together Our Acute Little Needle Points Of Pain Into A Permanent Testament?

For a certain few this may mean coughing on the great and the good, each of us now become the vector of bio-terrorism, should we wish it. But let us not drift into fantasy, tantamount to irony.

For most of us, this will mean not going back to work. It means staying home sick and the concomitant rent strike. It means remaining – politically, actually – sick.

It will mean exchanging the individual benefit, such as it is, of artificial care to the last gasp of breath for the social benefit of a healthier world. It will mean stepping out of the iron lung.

The ninth wind is too caustic to be directly borne. Cowled, the priest steps into it, but scurries back inside the vicarage before he has gone half a yard. The doctor gets a little further, turning his head away from the gale and scuttling crabwise across the street before breaking out in a riot of chilblains and beating on the door of the vicarage, seeking sanctuary and finding a rejuvenating nip of consecrated wine. The doughty squire turns his back to the wind entirely and trudges for a league across his fields. Afterward, whiskers stained claret, he brags about this to the priest and the doctor, omitting to mention that he not only sheltered the whole way behind the carthorse now left on a halter in the graveyard to freeze but left the fields entirely unploughed. Only the farmer's sick old aunt, waiting in an outhouse for doctor and priest that she may be granted permission to die, understands what must be done. She steps into the perishing wind, nightie whipping round her skinny ankles.

Liberals mock Trump cronies who assert they will happily die to keep the Dow Jones afloat. Where is our equivalent offer? What will we die for, if not one another? Are we willing to contract deadly disease, in this pandemic or the next, delivering sustenance to elderly neighbours? To black-market ventilators out of windscreen-wiper motors and sheets of plywood? To be arrested breaking quarantine in the act of doing what is right and thrown into the plague-pits operated by the new normal, which look rather like the plague-pits of centuries past? To be the edelweißpiraten of the new normal? To step out of the iron lung?

What if the grand sacrifice you are called to make looks like cooking dahl for pensioners far away from any front line, and embracing them recklessly in their final agony? What if it looks like accepting a life ten years shorter and harder on the hands? What if it looks like a cytokine storm shredding the organs? What if it looks like *the final wind, which cannot and must not be resisted, for if you do it will break your bones, turn you inside out, tear you limb from limb and leave you gutless and floating on the breeze? What if the only thing to be done is to be borne with it, to allow it to enter into you, to be aloft? In this way you may survive for a year or two; perhaps more. We must hope that it will be more. Sooner or later we will realize no wind now blows, save that constituted of our own drifting flesh. Perhaps there never was. In any case, we have chosen our path, and must be borne with it wherever it will go.*

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