

Esther Cameron

## THE INFECTED CITY

These fragments have I shored against my ruins.  
-- T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

The anti-magnets, the rulers  
Are ringing  
-- Paul Celan, *Fadensonnen*

So she got up after a while.... and entered the city again, the infected city.  
-- Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

### 1 THE SHOCK

It took us all by surprise,  
burst unpredicted  
on the holidays and excursions of spring,  
on the pupils and teachers  
in their schools, their yeshivas, their universities,  
on the plans of bride and groom,  
the old in their contracted spheres of motion,  
on the habitués of cafés, the hoteliers who had placed their orders,  
the working poor who were managing to get through the month.  
Like Amalek it cut off the weak.

Streets were empty,  
the highways were deserted,  
friends became faces on a screen,  
voices muffled by masks.  
In closed spaces anger erupted.  
The shopkeepers called out for aid  
and there was not enough  
(though for the great companies there was enough).

We improvised.  
Weddings were held in the open air,  
prayers were shouted from balconies.

In the assemblies, the committees  
a confusion of accusations,  
distractions, incomprehensible decisions  
paid for from behind the screen.  
Methods of control were put in place.

And the interpreters of waking dreams  
spoke of the hand of Providence  
hoped that the inner voice would speak  
predicted redemption  
soon.

And some believed  
and some wanted to believe  
and some laughed bitterly.

And into the world was breathed  
a riddling word:  
*corona.*

## 2 THE EARLY WARNINGS

You had seen and had not seen it coming  
saw not the form but the force  
that advanced wrapped in the cloud of unknowing  
emitted in the proliferation of our knowledge

And those who search for causes  
spoke of a microorganism fashioned  
on the unresting loom of evolution  
working always  
in the cells, in the molecules,  
in the flesh of pangolin or bat  
sold in markets, eaten by humans  
-- and in laboratories where human  
ingenuity ceaselessly toys  
with the mechanism of creation.

And darker voices muttered  
of cabals, of destruction released by design  
by initiates of dark rites,  
by extraterrestrials taking  
the forms of humans, or lizards.  
And the sane, the enlightened, the balanced, O those  
who had believed their world would last indefinitely  
laughed.

And you laughed and did not laugh.  
For you had seen  
what incalculable scope for cunning gapes  
in the complication of our knowledge:  
so many thought processes the simple cannot follow,  
so much information the simple cannot verify,  
so many processes that link human beings  
in ties not of friendship or kinship and of no place  
but as cogs in an elaborating machine  
that has no aim but profit  
whose conscience is the cost-benefit analysis  
that takes hold of law that buys the press and the networks and through them the state  
-- in essence, reptilian  
or something less ensouled.

And what of the human soul thus caught up  
what of the soul  
What might the soul thus twisted not devise  
against those not yet caught up?

### 3 AT THE CENTER

You lose your sense of taste and smell  
that is one possible sign  
sometimes there are no signs  
yet you carry in your breath  
the nano-bomb

you may experience respiratory symptoms  
you may have to be ventilated  
you may die  
after a few weeks of fighting for breath

you may think you have recovered  
may scarcely have noticed  
but find yourself forgetting things  
heart-attack stroke gangrene  
you may be immune  
and then lose your immunity

or deprived of livelihood by the methods of control  
you may starve

### 4 THE FAULT

And we saw that the fruit was good to eat  
and pleasing to the eye

that our children would live  
that our crops would not fail  
that our homes would be warm

that we would overcome our enemies  
if they did not  
get ahead of us

that our clothes would be fine  
that we could hear from a distance  
that we could fly through the air

that our labor would not be hard  
for our work would be done for us  
that we need not remember  
for things would remember for us

that we could have  
anything we wanted  
in pictures thrown on screens (we need not imagine)

that we need not need others  
that our needs would be met  
if we made enough money  
if we made no promises

and what if in the end  
our cravings bred monsters  
what if in the end  
we can no longer dig down  
through steel and glass strata of market forces  
to the earth to get our bread  
consumers consumed

what if in the end  
all goes back to dust

*for dust you are  
and to dust you shall return*

## 5 THE SENSOR

and you had heard it all happen  
in what was then the future  
though it was also the past

for had not the burden of the Fisher King been borne to you  
in riddling words that swam  
through oceans of time and distance, that dug  
through layers of sense and thought  
toward the point of the soul

saying in effect, we are made in G-d's image  
each one of us and all of us  
we are all from One and there is in us a will  
toward becoming One toward becoming

one mind one heart one pair of hands  
right and left  
to judge to love to repair

there is still time  
to recognize one another  
to speak the words of promise to join hands

but hurry

hurry

HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME  
HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME

for the soul is under siege  
there are other fishermen  
who weave nets of sense bait hooks with desire for power set traps of fear  
and around the earth we wish to ring with love  
clamp their manacles

*der Ring of the gold grasped only  
through denial of love*

*und morgen verdampft unser Meer*

and tomorrow the sea of the world-soul  
through which the poet's word swims  
evaporates

this you heard him say before he  
disappeared

*for poetry makes nothing happen  
it survives*

-- or not

## 6 THE COLLAPSE

A body no longer animated  
by the soul  
decomposes

each atom fending for itself

contention  
corruption

race against race  
hand against hand  
sex against sex  
and the great undead corporations  
against all

*things fall apart the center cannot hold*

then of course the riots

## 7 THE MAD LADY'S SONG

"The heart resists dominion

By words of love and truth  
It fears to tie its pinion  
It hugs its power to choose

It spurns the hand that's proffered  
It rushes to the door  
Outside of which the Scoffer  
Awaits with club and lure"

Thus sang the moated lady  
Who weaves upon her loom  
The severed ties of friendship  
The loves that snapped too soon

The threads of thoughts that almost  
Arrived at her conclusion  
That touched the common ground but thence  
Turned backward toward confusion

She listens for a knocking  
That never will be heard  
"Why am I thus?" she screams to G-d –  
"This situation is absurd!"

*For there is in the universe  
A strong force and a weak force  
And the weak force is love*

Love builds small nests  
Spiderwebs a breeze disturbs

The will to power builds in steel  
On a large scale  
Colossal statues skyscrapers empires conglomerates  
In the chinks of which love survives  
Until cleaned out

For love makes nothing happen

## 8 THE PLANNERS

And some said there is a Divine plan  
we are not in control  
a visitation sent to remind us  
of the *crown* of the true King

And others said there was a human plan  
a pathogen developed patented and released  
interlocking foundations holding companies  
quasi governmental agencies large pharmaceutical companies

interfaced by an information industry  
search engines television networks  
all holding stock in one another and having  
conflicts of interest  
confluence of interest  
in controlled social chaos

*we will inject your medical records under your skin with the vaccine  
you will have to take the vaccine  
though it may still be experimental  
and we will not be responsible  
we will track you by your cell phones  
we will drag you out of your homes  
we will enter without a warrant  
we will encourage you to inform on one another*

swarms of logos fill the screen  
and once human faces, logo-faces,  
rehearse the playing out  
of the scenario

\*

If love could plan  
What would it plan

Councils of the wise resolved  
To rectify the laws

Sacrifices of cunning  
To the common good

A center keeping track  
Of what each could give  
Of what each might need

A search for the managers  
Who would not eat us  
(Gather in tens and choose one  
And let those so chosen gather in tens and choose one  
And so on until at the top  
Appears one charged  
With the sense of the whole)

*We are not comfortable with that  
We have no time  
It must happen spontaneously it cannot be forced  
Things won't get so bad  
G-d will help*

Meanwhile the scenario  
Plays out  
For love makes nothing happen  
Nothing that  
Counts

*It was also written  
love that moves the sun and the other stars*

-- When was that?

## 9 THE SEARCH FOR SURVIVORS

ARE YOU THERE CAN YOU HEAR ME  
NOW I WANT YOU TO LISTEN VERY CAREFULLY  
THIS IS IMPORTANT

One wakes somewhere  
One wakes somewhere else

*try a note in morning dark  
i will answer where i am i am*

knowing

they have only one another wherever  
they are

Each looks for a look in the eyes of the other  
not to mistake

THIS IS IMPORTANT

One raises the subject  
The other indicates  
that he/she understands

They agree to stay connected  
and look for the others

THIS IS IMPORTANT  
HURRY UP PLEASE IT IS TIME  
THIS IS IMPORTANT

## 10 WHAT THE STILL SMALL VOICE SAID

*Stop*  
This cannot go on forever  
You must change your life

*Listen*

Something is searching for you  
The soul of humanity  
The soul of creation  
The Creator  
Listen for the ring of truth

You will hear different voices  
The voice of the one who wants to tell you something  
The voice of the one who wants to sell you something  
Sometimes intertwined  
Answer only  
The former

*Envision*

Try to see  
The Divine image  
In which all are made  
Try to see in the distance  
The city healed  
The city that is a garden  
At its center the tower of salvation  
That is the tree of life and the tree of knowledge  
Intertwined

*Connect*

to the Crown of Being  
the Will

*Look*

Try to perceive  
The Divine image where it crops out  
And below the surface  
The pieces of the city  
Scattered in the world

*Think*

Take stock of what you know  
Keep track of your observations  
Note any patterns  
Beware of exaggerations  
Keep checking  
Lay your intellect's gifts at the foot of the Tree of Life  
Put the puzzle together  
Become a scientist  
Of repair

*Speak*

Acknowledge what you know

Give over what you have learned  
But let it not be your word alone  
Let it not block your ears  
To the word of another

*Believe*

this  
much:  
that you will be helped

*listen still*

listen for the ring of truth  
follow  
the sound

*are you there can you hear me  
this is important*

It is time.

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## NOTES

This poem was consciously modeled on T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a work which in its time was consciousness-defining for many and which has raised innumerable echoes, of which Pynchon's novel (brought to mind by the grotesqueness of the current scene) is one. It has become far harder for poetry to play this defining role; but this, to me, is only one more reason to struggle against the current of the times. I hope the present Reader will be complicit with me in this, by sharing this poem as widely as possible. For the lack of poetry's consciousness-defining influence is, I submit, at the center of a current malaise, of which "the corona" has offered us a virulent symbol.

I see that besides the theme of the corona, a metaphor of earthquake runs through the poem, harking back to my 1970-71 elegy for Paul Celan, "Earthwake," itself written in the presence of *The Waste Land* as well as of Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats."

The immediate "shock" which precipitated the poem was the viewing of the movie *Plandemic*, which was sent to me via email by a friend after being blocked on Facebook, Google, and YouTube. (Here is a link to the movie -- <https://collectiveevolutionmedia.acemlnc.com/lt.php?s=dbe46be0831cc51c0dca918fd918497d&i=1289A1417A15A17986> -- I hope it still works.) I found its impact shattering, and the epigraph from Eliot reflects this. Concomitantly with this poem, I wrote a story, "[Tamima and the Lizard Queen](#)," based on my attempts to assess the plausibility of *Plandemic's* "conspiracy theory" about the origins of the virus. I could not check all its assertions; its persuasiveness for me derived from its consonance with a mistrust of the global technocracy which had been with me for a long time, expressed for the first time, perhaps, in my 1971 elegy for Paul Celan:

Then there was July:  
along streets with their new constructions --  
glass and concrete --  
matter itself gone gray  
and blank with pain  
like the face of a clubbed peasant  
telephotoed from Asia.

The lines were inspired by a new tower in downtown Seattle with black glass windows, typical of the corporate aesthetic which was also very much on display in the *Pandemic* movie. Thus the “coronavirus” appeared to me (even before I saw the movie, I’d expressed this in a Hebrew poem) to be a symbol if not an actual effect of global technocracy.

It may seem strange that I chose to struggle with this contemporary crisis in a poem frankly imitative of a classic. I have done this before; on the night of September 11, 2001, I reread Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium," and the next day borrowed its stanza form for a poem entitled "Tiresias Visits the Bombsite." I suppose it is a way of calling on the spirits of the ancestors.

I did not attempt Eliot's feat of speaking in the voices of various disconnected individuals, by virtue of which *The Waste Land* sometimes resembles a play in which the various characters are unaware of each other, unified only by an authorial consciousness that sometimes calls itself the Fisher King and sometimes Tiresias. Aside from the quotations (the ancestral voices), the speakers in *The Infected City* are mostly collective. There are only two individual voices – that of the Fisher King (a character based on the persona of Paul Celan) and the Mad Lady. The Fisher King, in the tradition to which Eliot refers, suffers from a wound which causes the land he rules to be waste; and it is said that if the wound can be healed the land will be restored to its fruitfulness. This figure has been associated in my mind with Celan since 1969, and stands for the current powerlessness of poetry which is a source of deep frustration in his work. The Mad Lady stands for the sense of community which is similarly blocked.

#### Section 1:

In the Jewish tradition, Amalek (see Deuteronomy 25: 17-19) is connected by gematria (numerical values of letters) with the word *safek*, doubt, and is also associated with the idea of coldness. Thus could be called a harbinger of a world-view premised on the denial of love (see section 5), which is seen in the poem as the ultimate source of the plague.

"The highways were deserted" – see the song of Deborah, Judges 5:6.

The name "corona" has recalled to many the crown of the true King. Less widely known is the fact that in the Kabbala, Keter (crown) is the highest of the Sefirot (Divine emanations), and another name for it is Ratzon (will). One of Celan's best-known love poems bears the title "Corona." The Israeli poet Ruth Netzer pointed this out some months ago, but obtusely, I did not then see the relevance of this very personal love poem to the plague. By the end of this poem I understood.

In the background of this conclusion to the first part are some poignant lines by the Austrian poet Georg Trakl: "Gott sprach eine sanfte Flamme zu seinem Herzen: o Mensch! (God spoke a gentle flame to his heart: o human!)" Amid the fearfulness of the events, the naming of the situation with a special word functions as a sign of

grace. The human is human, the universe is the Creation, the world is redeemable, by means of the word.

#### Section 2

"Lizards": some very strange ideas are circulating about the elite who may be behind the plague. The author regards these ideas as exaggerations of the popular imagination, but based on some real sense of the inhuman forces involved.

#### Section 4

This, obviously, is a reading of the eating from the tree of knowledge in Genesis 3, in the light of the present situation.

#### Section 5

"The Sensor" is an attempt to "translate" one strand in the work of Paul Celan, an interpretation that is admittedly simplistic and slanted toward the positive. I do, however, perceive an impulse toward unity in Celan's work, which is engaged in a desperate struggle with fragmentation. My sense of this impulse was reinforced when Rabbi Dr. David Shapiro o.b.m., on reading a poem in which I summarized my conclusions from Celan's work, was reminded of Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, of whom I thus became aware. The words "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME" are from Part II of *The Waste Land*, where someone is talking in a restaurant that is about to close.

"around the earth we wish to ring with love" – this is an allusion to the conclusion of Celan's speech "The Meridian," which ends with the finding of a circle that evidently symbolizes poetry's world-unifying impulse. "Der Ring," on the other hand, is that of Wagner's "Ring" cycle, which describes a world built by the power of a ring fashioned from gold that can only be obtained through the denial of love. This can be seen as a metaphor for industrial society, which has always seemed to me worth noting, regardless of other messages in Wagner's work.

"*Und morgen verdampft unser Meer* (and tomorrow our sea evaporates)" is the last line of "Inselhin," which concludes Celan's second book of poetry, *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle*.

"For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives..." from W.H. Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats." The passage continues: "In the valley of its saying where executives/ Would never want to tamper." Celan, of course, did not survive, and it is the view of this poem that the executives have in fact tampered considerably.

#### Section 6

"Things fall apart, the center cannot hold" – from Yeats' "The Second Coming."

#### Section 7

The "moated lady" harks back to Tennyson's poem "Mariana," whose title figure, immured in a "moated grange," waits for a lover who will never come. Also present is Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott," a similarly isolated figure who spends her days weaving.

"Why am I thus?" see Genesis 25:22.

"There is in the universe a strong force and a weak force, and the weak force is love" – these words, or something similar, were written in a letter by a close relative of mine many years ago.

#### Section 8

"It was also written" comes from a section of Celan's poem *Engführung* which seems to be struggling with the vision of determinism. The poet does not go on to state *what* was written, but breaks off. "Love that moves the sun and the other stars" – the last line of Dante's *Commedia* – might possibly have been the quotation that was not quoted there.

#### Section 9

"ARE YOU THERE CAN YOU HEAR ME", etc. – this is a self-quotation, the conclusion of a poem called "The Invaded," written in 1968 and brought back to me by the present crisis. I quote this poem in full in "Tamima and the Lizard Queen." "try a note in morning dark..." – from a song by the Jerusalem poet Hadassah Haskale.

#### Section 10

The last section of *The Waste Land* is entitled "What the Thunder Said" and concludes with three passages, each headed by a Sanskrit word; in his Notes Eliot translates the words as "give, sympathize, control," which as advice never seemed to me especially helpful. I tried offering some alternate words of advice, though I was unable to supply a foreign-language source for them. Elsewhere I have said a great deal more, and there is a great deal more still to be said by others, about the kind of "plan" hinted at in the passage beginning "If love could plan"; here I could only try, by means of a few "key words" to suggest the basic attitudes and determinations that would make the realization of such a plan possible.

"You must change your life" is a translation of the last line of Rilke's sonnet "Archaischer Torso Apolls," which I think hints at the Divine image though in a pagan guise.

The last line of the poem is a translation of the last line of Celan's poem "Corona." As here, the words "Es ist Zeit" form a separate stanza at the end of the poem.