'Squam in the Time of COVID

by Mary E. Flaherty
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I had hopes aplenty for 2020, that winter with almost no snow,
But March roared in like a lion (no lamb) and knocked us all quite low.
It started quite slowly, this mysterious virus, but it would not be delayed,
And soon we were mired in the dreadful COVID cascade.

Intent on keeping the virus at bay, we recite a novel litany.
Abundance of caution, avoid large groups, practice social distancing.
Flatten the curve—wait, does that mean my waistline’s extra ten?

Plateau, second wave, quarantine, PPE, essential workers, your bubble
Wash your hands, stay at home, stay six feet away or there will trouble!
You’re drifting, back off and give me some space!
Where’s your mask? Is she coughing? Don’t touch your face!

Can you get it from food? Should you have food delivered? Is it okay to shop?
Whatever comes in, clean off the containers! Clean off the counter tops!
Leave non-perishables in the car for three days to detox.
Do even fruits and veggies need a hot, soapy wash?

Wait, what if we can’t even get any food? The stores are running out!
Every day’s a blizzard eve, and empty-shelf rumors are flying about.
Girded for battle, seniors set off to forage, their hearts all aflutter.
“I scored at Shaw’s! Toilet paper in bulk, black beans and peanut butter!”

It’s a state of emergency! We’re all hunkered down, pinned in our homes.
No bars, dining out, no shopping, no gyms, no touch ups for hair or fingers or toes.
The Village Hall stands empty and dark, the library’s books locked away.
We’re trapped in a time loop, how will we keep track of the days?
Is it the weekend? Should I put out the trash? Martha and I have a strategy!
We’ll go online and order two sets of Days-of-the-Week panties!
But our plan is abandoned upon review,
For how would we know which pair of panties to choose?

Afraid and confused, we’re glued to the news, hoping Charlie will speak in hopeful tones.
But higher and higher the deaths tolls rise and up the new case counts go.
With gatherings forbidden, gloom descends. We’re doomed to Zoom.
I can’t get on! I can’t see you! I can’t talk! Would you please just Mute!

Ad revenue dropping, the GD Times is forced to pare down.
It’s gotten so skinny, it doesn’t last thru cereal and coffee now.
And Tuesday and Saturday’s editions have taken a bow.
I long for a nice, juicy headless tuna saga, and how.

And over it all, the endless whine and weed-wacker racket
Of the ceaseless presidential campaign’s mind-numbing din
Makes us all feel like basket cases and sets kin against kin.
Will we never get back to normal again?

There is some upside to the forced slower pace.
Time to tackle projects and plans long delayed.
Moms and dads working from home can be full-time in Squam,
And it feels like summer with so many kids running around.

At last spring flounces in with snowdrops and snow.
We cheer for bulbs bursting and burst from our homes,
The loop round the village takes longer than before,
It’s interval training! Walk. Stop. Talk. Talk some more!
I often chat from my upstairs deck with passersby below,
And gazing down upon the ladies’ crowns, I cannot help but take note,
With salons off limits, the widening gray skullcaps swell.
It’s like standing on top of the world, watching the polar icecap melt.

Birds are chirpier, new leaves on the trees the most dazzling chartreuse.
The ocean’s crystalline, glassy green shallows reveal every beach bijou.
Have you ever witnessed a sky quite so clear, such a perfect, picture-postcard blue?
See, climate deniers, what we can do when jets are grounded and we drive less too.

Summer’s divine, the Bay’s full of boats, on the beach we draw lines in the sand.
Yacht Club take-out, porch dining too! How ‘bout a nice, quiet table...upwind?
SeaFair, Library Party, Arts & Crafts, and the Village Players troubadours
All hop online, ‘cause pandemic or not, Squam’s traditions endure.

Cocktail parties in driveways soon become a “thing.”
Just don’t forget, it’s B-Y-E—bring your own everything!
Ladies at Cambridge float in their tubes on days still hot,
Praying lion’s mane jellyfish don’t bite their bottoms!

Summer’s gone in a moment, but fall’s glorious colors almost atone.
Hurricane season gobbles the alphabet; then they add Greek on!
Fauci implores us: Stay home! No holiday travel to dear ones this year.
First Thanksgiving, then Christmas are celebrated onscreen.

We do our best to make these peculiar fêtes cheerful and festive,
But walled off in our little Zoom boxes, truth is we’re feeling restive.
We long to kiss kids and grandkids, to hold friends and family close.
It feels as though our lives have been frozen.
We’ve felt mad, overwhelmed, frustrated, sad, scared and lonely,
But never alone, because we here in Squam look after our own.
A light at the end of the tunnel appears! Though still quite faint,
It’s close enough to see that it’s not just another train!

Vaccines are coming! We’re finally seeing the rear of this dreadful year.
Thanks to Pammie’s bright idea, we welcome 2021 with brio and cheer.
At the stroke of nine on porches, decks, driveways and streets we appear,
To make some noise and ring in a hopeful New Year.

With school bells and church bells, doorbells and sleigh bells,
Air horns and trumpets, drums, and whistles,
Cow bells and conch shells and pots clanged with ladles,
Cannons and cherry bombs, even a dinner gong, we raise holy hell.

The wild hullabaloo soars up and up through the air,
A joyous roar to exorcise demons and banish our fears.
Adios, 2020! Good riddance, begone!
Better days are coming for the village of Squam.

By now it must seem that like COVID, this poem drags on with no end,
But let me assure you that like COVID, to its end it does finally wend.
For the promised end I bend again to Lerner & Loewe,
Those immortal lords, my transcendent musical friends.
NOTE FROM THE POET

My large extended family treasures words—spoken, written, sung, prose and poetry. Raised in Winchester, I also spent many happy days at Good Harbor Beach, where my great aunts had an ice cream and candy shop. Life took me to Boston, then NYC, where my children were born, then to San Francisco where they grew up. During 35 years in SF, I longed for Gloucester and visited often, usually in Annisquam. A long, rewarding career as a professional fundraiser made my impossible dream come true. The day after I retired, I moved to the Village, where I’ve been happily in residence for five years and where I rode out the pandemic. Usually I write prose, but I find poetry is often more powerful and expressive for capturing major events. Its distillation creates a sharp picture and allows readers to access the emotion of events.

DISCLAIMER

This poem was submitted in 2021, well before the development of the official Gloucester400+ poetry guidelines, so it was included as written.