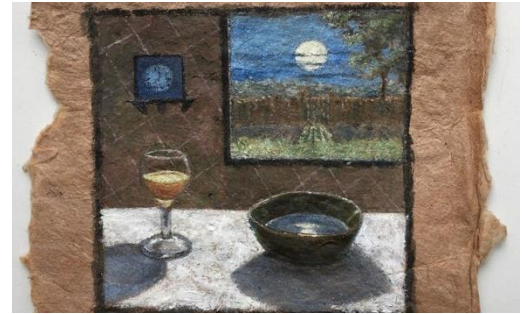


Pandemic-inspired poetry: The moving finger writes . . . again

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Pandemic-inspired poetry reworks a classic form to reflect the landscape of Covid-19. Report by Vicky Walker



Artwork for the first section of The Quarantine Quatrains: A new Rubaiyat

WHEN the limitations of the lockdown drove the Revd Dr Malcolm Guite to the comfort of old books, he was surprised to find that a translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* offered a framework for expressing his disorientation.

“Somehow this Mediaeval Persian reflection on life’s joys and sorrows, on how our mortal frailty intensifies our brief pleasures and deepens our love and intimacy, all seemed to speak immediately into our time,” he writes in the introduction to his new poetry booklet *The Quarantine Quatrains: A new Rubaiyat*, a limited print run of which is being sold to raise funds for charity.

ROGER WAGNER *Artwork for the third section of The Quarantine Quatrains: A new Rubaiyat*

“At first, there was a sense of time opening up,” Dr Guite said, of the early period of the pandemic. “I was fortunate to have a garden, and some of the early parts of my *Quarantine Quatrains* reflect the sense of the gift of time, the beauties of birdsong in the quiet skies, nature returning, and so forth.

“But then there was a sense, of course, of frailty: a renewed awareness of my own and other people’s mortality, and a deepening empathy for all those for whom this crisis was bringing real suffering, and, in some cases, death.”

Apart from the literary inspiration of the original poem, and the re-engagement with nature, he found that the practical adjustments — “the change in routines” — offered additional material: “the new technology, especially Zoom, which I felt deserved a whole section to itself. I also took up some of the poem’s other themes, but in my own context: the celebration of wine, love, and friendship.

“Finally, as I came to the close of the poem, I wanted to write an appreciation, an elegy, and a prayer for those nurses and care workers who had given their lives in this crisis to save the lives of others.”

AS HIS plans developed, he approached the artist Roger Wagner to visualise his words. He said: “Apart from the psalms, I’ve never before illustrated anyone else’s poetry; so, when Malcolm first raised the possibility, I wasn’t sure if I would be able to.” He found the offer “an irresistible challenge”, however, and was intrigued by the parallels in the original work.

“When though I first read the *Quatrains*, I was captivated by the way they bring Khayyam’s *Rubáiyát* into the new landscape of Covid-19, and wondered whether I might be able to do the same with the Persian miniatures that were first used to illustrate the original poem.”



Guite explained how their respective methods worked together: "I chose to use the same 'quatrain' form, and the same metre and rhyme scheme that Fitzgerald had used in his great translation of the original poem. Roger responded by using the 'miniature' form, and some special Nepalese paper, of which he had just enough for the project. Both of us were endeavouring to respond to and update a classic form in our respective arts of poetry and painting."

ROGER WAGNER *Artwork for the sixth section of The Quarantine Quatrains: A new Rubaiyat*



Mr Wagner writes in the introduction about the origins of his approach: "After travelling in Syria many years ago, I produced a series of paintings of the mountain where one of the Desert Fathers, Simeon Stylites, sat on his pillar. The pictures were painted on pieces of handmade Nepalese paper whose rough colour and texture seemed to mirror the desert experience. The paper is no longer obtainable, but I had just enough scraps left for the seven groups of quatrains. Its torn and jagged edges somehow provided a reminder of the real life-and-death background of these poems."

The pandemic had come close, he said, through the experiences of his family, although his own routine was largely unchanged. "In one sense, the lockdown has barely affected the rhythm of my working day. On the other hand, with one close family member effected with 'long Covid' fatigue, and a hospital social-worker wife bringing daily reports from the front line, the effects of the virus have been impossible to ignore."

Dr Guite wrote about how his own feelings shifted as the death toll rose. "When I came to the last section of my quatrains, the elegiac note prevailed, and I found myself remembering and praying for all those whom we have lost. When I wrote the verse:

*All loved and loving, carried to the grave
The ones whom every effort could not save,
Amongst them all those carers whose strong love
Bought life for others with the lives they gave.*

I knew that this special edition should be dedicated to those carers, and be sold to raise funds for CWC [The Care Workers Charity], the charity that is doing so much to look after them."

The Quarantine Quatrains: A new Rubaiyat by Malcolm Guite with illustrations by Roger Wagner is published in a limited edition by the authors, all profits going to the Care Workers Charity. It is available for £15 including p&p from rogerwagner.co.uk

*1 Awake to what was once a busy day
When you would rush and hurry on your way
Snatch at your breakfast, start the grim commute
But time and tide have turned another way.*

*2 For now, like you, the day is yawning wide
And all its old events are set aside
It opens gently for you, takes its time*

And holds for you — whatever you decide.

*3 This morning's light is brighter than it seems
Your room is rafted with its golden beams
The bowl of night was richly filled with sleep
And dawn's left hand is holding all your dreams*

*4 Your mantle clock still sounds its silver chime
The empty page invites an idle rhyme
This quarantine has taken many things
But left you with the precious gift of time*

*5 Your time is all your own — yet not your own
The rose may open, or be overblown
So breathe in this day's fragrance whilst you may
To each of us the date of death's unknown.*

*6 Then settle at your desk, uncap your pen
And open the old manuscript again
The empty hours may tease you out of thought
Yet leave you with a poem now and then.*

*III 13 Some days I am diverted by a call:
The soft computer chime that summons all
To show a face to faces that we meet
Mirages, empty mirrors on the wall.*

*14 Alas that all the friends we ever knew
Whose lives were fragrant and whose touch was true
Can only meet us on some little screen
Then zoom away with scarcely an adieu.*

*15 We share with them the little that we know
These galleries of ghosts set in a row
They flicker on the screen of life awhile
But some have left the meeting long ago.*

*16 We used to stroll together on the green
Who now divide the squares upon the screen,
The faces of our friends, so far apart
Tease us with tenderness that might have been*

*17 Some day we'll break the bread, we'll pour the wine
And meet and kiss and feast beneath the vine,
Till then we'll sweeten solitude with verse
And yearn through pain, and watch each day decline.*

VI 28 They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshýd gloried and drank deep:
*But now in every corner of the world
The wild things flourish whilst the cities sleep*

29 *For when they see our influence abate
The banished creatures soon resume their state:
Blithe dolphins sport along the grand canal,
Coyotes call across the golden gate.*

30 *The grass grows green in every city square,
The little foxes, once so shy and rare,
Saunter our streets and boulevards by day
Whilst birds and insects throng the cleaner air*

31 *How soon the tide of nature has returned
How soon renew the forests that we burned
How soon they seed and repossess our streets
Those precious plants and animals we spurned.*

32 *Perhaps in all this crisis, all this pain,
This reassessment of our loss and gain
Nature rebukes our brief authority
Yet offers us the chance to start again*

33 *And this time with a new humility,
With chastened awe, and mutual courtesy;
To re-accept the unearned gift of life
With gratitude, with joy and charity.*

34 *Perhaps we'll learn to live without so much
To nurture and to cherish, not to clutch,
And, if I'm spared, I'll hold the years I'm given
With gentler tenure and a lighter touch.*