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Sick Days: Sonnet Corona

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How many famous people have been sick in this house? Famous meaning old. Horace Mann had tuberculosis here when cobalt was thought to be the cure for consumption.

The day I got sick, I was at the doctor’s, but not in that order. Just the standard questions: Family history of cancer? I don’t know, I say, we think so? Do I mention the lack of physicians in Cultural Revolution-era China? She doesn’t need a history lesson. None, writes my doctor, and I think I should have given the history lesson. Sex with men, women? Anyone, I say, and at least that gets me a laugh, though I wasn’t trying to be funny. It’s funny. I like to joke about the ghosts, but they haven’t shown up, yet.
I like to joke about the ghosts but they haven’t shown up yet and now would be a good time. On a trip to Shanghai to bury my grandmother, I went sightseeing in the renovated garden, manufactured rockeries and a zigzag bridge my uncle explained gives you an advantage in outrunning a goose. Only months later, writing and rewriting the scene, I think that he probably meant ghost. But outside, a goose startles and lurches on the banks of the Charles, and the students shriek from its hiss. Sometimes they must not be fast enough.

Maybe that is what my uncle meant. What kind of creature can’t navigate a turn?
What kind of creature can’t navigate a turn?
I’m done sweating through the sheets. I’ve moved on
to pacing the room. Horrible things
probably happened here. When my sister calls,

I act worse than I am so I can get back
to reading aloud the dead poets. Someone wrote
a famous song about a meatball in this house. I play it.
I spill tea on *Roget’s Third*, the first time

I’m cracking open the pages, and it’s to put Kleenex
between them. It’s a used copy so at least someone
has cracked the pages before. In my attic room,
there used to be an observatory, the only one in town.

The thing about stars is you can admire them in peace,
knowing they’re already dead.
The thing about stars is you can admire them in peace, knowing they’re already dead. A physician in the 1800s, Roget would have been familiar with the kingdom *mortis*. He’s famous now for classifying language, imposing rigor on an undiagnosed mass of related words, his thesaurus. I don’t know if that has any bearing on his skill as a physician, but I suppose I can relate, not hoping to be remembered as a lawyer. I suppose I don’t hope to be remembered, period, but if it has to be for something, I hope it’s for a meatball song. I hope it’s among friends. I hope I was a good friend. There’s a word that means linger with me after the meal is done. I linger and malinger. From the couch, I hear my email ping. Everything on earth is busy.
Everything on earth is busy!
In 16th-century Shanghai, a son failed
his imperial exams and built a garden
in a show of filial piety. He called it 豫,

pleasing and satisfying to one’s parents.
Diaries from the time mention it frequently
as the center of high society; in the shrubbery
red squirrels scampered and chirped. Next

the garden’s upkeep ruined his family.
The moral of this story is that some people
have journaled for centuries, and I balk
at the idea of morning pages. Shanghainese

squirrels scurry. I wish I could drag each day
behind me like a weighted blanket.
I wish I could drag each day
behind me like a weighted blanket. But
in the yard, one tiny rabbit leaps over
another and newly leafed branches slash
at my windows. I’m afraid of what it means
to be left behind. To prepare for future
orientations, the law firm wants to know:
If you could have dinner

with any four people, dead or alive,
who with—and why? I live with four
of my very good friends, but godspeed
to anyone trying to schedule a full house.

I’ll take what I can get. Anyone
who survives this is lucky.
Anyone who survives this is lucky.
What’s a word the opposite of unscathed? At a party before the pandemic, a doctor-to-be tells me that we (society) overinvest in the final years of life.

*How do you know they’re final?* I want to say but don’t—I don’t want him to know I’m still listening. It’s 2023.

The doctor-to-be is a doctor. Everything that isn’t terminal is chronic, and no one is saying it’s an emergency. It’s not too late. Emergency. *Emergency.* Am I lying when I say I don’t want to last forever, not even in a poem?
I don’t want to last forever, not even in a poem. Would it be worse never to remember, or never to forget? My mom says she can tell we’re all waiting for her to die, so to spite us, she’s staying alive—

if she can remember to, ha ha. But spite is a feeling that outlasts, so I’m sure she’ll follow through. I’m the keeper of her life’s more sordid details until I’m gone too: meat cleaver crashing through my bedroom door, broken leg at the foot of the stairs all night, friends my friends—thirteen, all of us—sweeping up the shattered plates. How did she get away with it? How did they, the men who came to haunt us in her sleep, get away each day without remembering it? Who are you responsible for keeping alive?
Who are you responsible for keeping alive?  
My mom asks me for the 500th time  
if the St. Ives apricot scrub I bought her  
is the same as her discontinued dollar-store brand.

She likes to stare into the passenger-seat mirror  
while I drive. It’s amazing that one of the final things  
to leave her is her vanity. How do I know it’s final?  
On my last day in quarantine, I sat on the counter  
and photographed myself for no one. For the internet,  
I posted a black-and-white family photo, stiff postures  
and plain Communist garb. Friends commented that they could see  
an echo of her in me. My mother was beautiful and likes to pretend  
that’s all she was. She was. I wish I knew her  
in the past tense. How many stars have been sick in this house?
How many people have walked through these walls? I joke about the ghosts when they haven’t said a word to me.

I don’t know what I should be running from. The stars, I understand, are already dead. But everything on earth is busy busy, and each day passes me with me. I’m such a drag. Wait. I mean I’m lucky. I know I’m dying when I say I don’t want to last forever, buried in some poem.

Who made me responsible for anything.