



Volume 11



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CREATIVE NONFICTION: QUARANTINED

Ann Kathryn Kelly

See

It snuck up on us, most of us. We see this now.

Outside of a handful of specialists—epidemiologists, scientists, one whistleblowing doctor on the front lines in China who is no longer with us—we ignored the rumbles, the shifting ground, the building pressure, that has blown the top off this volcano.

Did it really just start two months ago? It feels, already, so much longer. We heard about it, in passing. But it was half a world away.

Concerning, then? Not really. It won't come here. A few weeks later? Alright, maybe. A few days ago? Yes, probably.

Today?

Sealed borders, emptying streets. Flatten the curve. Shelter in place. Designated grocery shopping hours in parts of the United States for the elderly—7:00 to 8:00 a.m., every Wednesday. To shield them, keep them safe, from the rest of us.

We see it now, we are living it, we fear we'll cross—are already crossing—an unfathomable line into a world we believed existed only in dystopian books and movies. One shaped by fear, questions, unknowns, mathematical equations, survival of the fittest.

Society wonders when life will return to *normal*. Yet, our new normal is informed, changed, by biology and the blind lessons it metes; in the swelling number of infected around the globe.

Meanwhile, liquor distilleries in parts of the United States shift, overnight, from producing booze to cranking out hand sanitizer. Offered free, to those most in need, who at this point is all of us.

Meanwhile, a pedestrian on a street in Beijing looks skyward on a spring afternoon; observes, with wonder, a peek of blue sky as smog over China parts. Space agencies rush to commit the record drop in air pollution to the history books, an eyebrow-popping 25-percent decline in nitrogen dioxide emissions, when compared with the same four-week period of one year ago. The upside to lockdown. The proof that climate change—climate hurt—is real.

Fish, for the first time in a long time, are spotted in canals in Venice, Italy, one morning in March 2020. They'd always been there, of course they had, but few saw them in the congested, polluted waterways.

While her inhabitants scatter behind closed doors, some willingly, some not,

Mother Earth draws in a deep breath. Exhales.

We turn our undivided attention from ourselves outward, in a way that feels strange to a global society conditioned—reared—to lead with, *What about me?*

In this moment when self-isolation is a choice in some areas, a government mandate in others, we rediscover that social media can unite us when we don't use it to divide us. We embrace ways to reach across digitally, safely, to keep connection alive. A revelation sinks in. We are in this, every person, country, city, village, together. We are responsible for the elderly, the immunocompromised, the vulnerable, the poor, for each other.

Meanwhile, Venice's fish shimmer and dart through empty canals. Skies clear. Italian citizens, in a country on lockdown, sing opera from balconies, their arias lifting through the air to settle onto those around them, on other quarantined balconies. It reaches through YouTube, to ears around the world. Their songs, the definition of the human spirit's capacity to hope and hold on to each other in whatever way allowable.

Mother Earth pulls in another long breath. Spins on her axis, hoping humanity will internalize the lessons this time. Will see, will act, will reprioritize. Will resist the pull to return to the old ways, the easy ways, the devastating ways, when given the green light to pick their lives back up again.