

Pandemic

You can catch it in a lift —
on a crowded bus, on your way to work
or noticing a stranger in the street
who, catching your eye, looks down and away.

Sometimes it's something someone says,
in a meeting, over dinner, even on a date.
Like a half-suppressed but barked-out sneeze
that sprays its lethal shower of droplets,
a single word can work its way inwards
connect with your own particular receptors,
primed by love and learning to receive —
each affected part infecting its neighbours
downwards and inwards, breaking in,
invading your body, cell by hapless cell,
leaving you diminished and overwhelmed.

No one's immune, we're all susceptible
it's just a matter of who, when and how.
A scourge as toxic as Justinian's plague
It's in amongst us, this thing we call shame.

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Mr Nice Guy and the Mongrel

One day the wild dog of anger found me
mangy hackles risen, yellow teeth bared.

I tied him down with the leash of shame
Hid him in a kennel, in my cold grey yard.

I fed him though, with lumps of umbrage,
gobbets of fear, juicy morsels of loathing.

He grew 'til I could no longer hold him.
Now if I'm shamed, he bursts out barking

It's good to have the shield of his ferocity
but my courtyard is empty. So is my bed.

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The Stick and the Stone

It's not the words that hurt,
it's looking in the mirror;
The daily call to self-scar or curse,
Meeting the same cold loathing in the eyes
Every day of your diminished life.

That's when you need to cast around
For the tiny, two-leaved seedling in the soil,
That emerald shoot of determination —
Forcing its way up, drawn by the light:
Rained on, blown down, trodden in the wreck
But still there, holding on — a little green god
That pipes up for living, that carols the spirit,
That insists upon life in its every increase;
Blessing all things — including itself;
Opening its boughs to the wind and the sky,
Plunging its roots into ever-deeper darkness,
Singing into being the great tree of soul.

No, never the words —
But the daily struggle at the mirror:
The unavoidable seeing of one's self,
The turning of old scorns into tolerance;
Of tolerance into lenity, of lenity into joy —
The slow internal alchemy that is love.