

## Latter Days

Poems from a plague season

Frederick Turner

### Spring Harvest

The Indian paintbrush paints the meadows scarlet,  
The wood-doves woo, the tender leaves turn green,  
Birdsong is everywhere, the sky is violet,  
A morning cloud is lit to tangerine.

All life rejoices, but its guest is dying;  
The streets are void, the air is strangely clean;  
Death stalks the human cities, terrifying:  
Grey lungs, grey thoughts, and not a trace of green.

We had forgotten Death, the harvester,  
He's come now for his crop, his ashen tithe;  
We thought we had the power to defer  
Forever that old specter with his scythe.

O yes, he's part of life, is Master Death:  
We name life's colors, but he takes our breath.

## **The Sahara Sandstorm Comes to Texas**

*June 27 2020*

Dust out of Africa smelling of locusts,  
Smelling of turmeric, burnt tires, honey,  
Dried dung, cumin, sour cassava,  
Smells of my childhood, dreadful, returning,  
Smelling of black skin, dogs, and love—  
All this roaring in gales from the east,  
Middle passage all over again,  
Turning my sky white as burnouses,  
White as a blind eye, white as breastmilk,  
Gusting like furnaces, blowing me over,  
Smelling like resin dripped on the drumhead,  
Beating with sweetness, terror and holiness,  
Roaring like lions in the heat of the day.

Plague out of Thebes or blessing of new things?

## **In a Plague Spring (in an Election Year)**

In spring the laciest leaf and sweetest green  
Belongs to this wild carrot whose white stars  
Of clustered florets make a pretty scene,  
Like baby's-breath about more noble flowers.

By April they have set their thousand seeds,  
That cling in matted masses to your clothes,  
Voracious of survival, pods of needs  
That now have overwhelmed the ancient rose.

Like certain ideologies, they feel  
So sweet and natural at first, but spread  
And clutch and smother up the true and real;

This is the hemlock that scared Athens fed  
To Socrates to cap his civic meal.  
It numbed his feet, his knees, his heart, his head,

And he was dead.

## The Cytokine Storm

The body's a seven-gated city  
Whose citizens live by a norm,  
Competing and sharing, in praise and in pity,  
Except in the cytokine storm.

When the guardians designed to defend us  
Come to hate those who do not conform,  
Then what should befriend us becomes what will end us  
In the wrath of the cytokine storm.

With a knee on the throat of his brother  
The guardian has turned to the germ,  
And the kinsman or lover is marked as the Other  
And drowned in the cytokine storm.

When the Right is the poisonous virus,  
The Left is what does us more harm;  
When the Left is the toxin to fire and inspire us,  
The Right is the cytokine storm.

We live in a sickening spiral  
Where form is destroyed by reform,  
Where the message that's worst is the one that goes viral,  
Unleashing the cytokine storm.

The only recourse in this fever  
Is refusal to go with the swarm:  
Reject the deceiver, instruct the believer,  
And ride out the cytokine storm.

## After COVID

What is this creeping from the chrysalis?  
An ancient form of life.  
What is the purpose of its metamorphosis?  
Creation out of strife.

A strange return to cottage industry;  
A kind of money-mine;  
An odd contemplative philosophy;  
Home redesigned as shrine;

A silence in the tumult of the sky;  
Cities designed for friends;  
Roads turned to streets, walks for the passers-by;  
Places not means but ends;

The marketplace become an everywhere;  
Work as its own sweet scrip;  
All persons servants, everyone an heir;  
Wealth made of craftsmanship;

The family come back from its long death;  
The person valued for the mind;  
Earth breathing now its green and azure breath,  
Gardened by humankind;

And now the universe is opened wide,  
The bold explorers fly:  
Our wings now grown to bear us on the ride  
Into the starry sky.