

COVID Spring

COVID *spring*

GRANITE STATE PANDEMIC POEMS



Edited by
Alexandria Peary

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INTRODUCTION

April 2020 was a time of daily news briefings and online learning, of a stock market out of sync with the country, of DIY hair cuts and the hoarding of canned goods, of never putting gas in our cars, of record unemployment, of learning how to use Zoom, of hand sanitizers, of special shopping hours reserved for senior citizens, of needing to ask, “Google, what day is it?”, of not enough ventilators, of not enough masks, of some told to stay home and others working long hours to save lives, of the essential and the non-essential. It was the absurdity of a parking lot or supermarket full of bandits and surgeons.

April seemed to last a year; April didn’t seem part of any normal season, at least not one of the Vivaldi four. It was a pandemic spring. It was an orchard of thirty days that didn’t bloom in the usual way. Online cocktail hours, online weddings, online graduations, online funerals. Our lives on April 1 did not resemble our lives on April 30. When headlines in the *New York Times* predicted on April 1 that the “Coronavirus May Kill 100,000 to 240,000 in U.S. Despite Actions, Officials Say” and “Grim Toll Projected Even With Distancing,” for even the newscasters, it felt implausibly apocalyptic. Then we watched the number of the COVID-19 dead rise from an awful handful to an unbelievable hundred to a shocking thousand, numbers still ascending, until by April 30, 63,001 people in the United States had succumbed to COVID-19. As of the writing of this introduction, in late June 2020, New Hampshire has witnessed 367 deaths from COVID-19, the United States 128,103, and the planet 505,518.

Yet this anthology is emblematic of what has made this global crisis

hopeful—as institutions and personal lives are put in limbo or permanently boarded up, somehow there’s opportunity to do things differently, both for communities and individuals.

Since the Academy of American Poets declared it as such in 1996, April has officially been National Poetry Month. In healthier times, we would have celebrated by attending bookstore readings or presentations at our local public library, or maybe cheering on a high school student reciting at the Poetry Out Loud state finals in Concord. Previously, geography might have kept New Hampshire writers apart—an event in Littleton too far to attend from Manchester, and vice versa. One of the ironies of this pandemic is how social distancing has brought us closer. COVID-19 put many of us inside our homes, and while we didn’t make the drive to a poetry reading, we turned to online communities of fellow writers across the state. Longstanding face-to-face community writing groups are migrating to Zoom; spoken word events are uploading onto Facebook; and people are congregating virtually to attend twice-a-week events sponsored by the Poetry Society of New Hampshire.

This anthology is April 2020 in the Granite State, but I also believe it is the future. The book pulses with the creative energy of poets from across the state coming together over a compressed amount of time to write a manuscript together, responding to the call Kirsty Walker, President of Hobblebush Books, and I sent out in late March for an anthology on the pandemic. Over the course of eight meetings every Wednesday and Saturday during April, fifty-eight writers from New Hampshire met with me in an online writers’ group to help each other start poems about the crisis. Writers gathered from towns including Alton and Amherst, Brookline, Kensington, Milford, Hancock, Rochester, Concord, Portsmouth, Belmont, Strafford, Chesterfield, Wolfeboro, Grafton, New Hampton, Manchester, Chesterfield, and Canterbury.

At the conclusion of National Poetry Month, writers were invited to submit their poems for blind review, though participation in the virtual writing group was not required for publication, nor a guarantee. The time frame for creation was compressed and intense:

writers would give form and shape to these experiences in real time within a month; a book-length manuscript would result within thirty days. Many New Hampshire writers answered the call to create out of this crisis; we received far more poems than we could fit into the anthology and had to turn away work we admired.

Fifty-four of the state's poets are represented in this anthology, writing of job loss, loneliness and love, masks, social distancing, surreal visitors, uncertainty, graduations deferred, grief, neighborly and less-than-neighborly acts, observing the beginning of the pandemic and making projections about the future, recalibrating or confirming what it means to be human, to be a resident of this region. In a remarkable range of poetic form and style, these writers provide a thirty-day snapshot of what life was like in the Granite State in April of 2020. This anthology is a community that only becomes better when you, dear reader, pull up a chair—no mask or social distancing required—and read us.

—ALEXANDRIA PEARY, NEW HAMPSHIRE POET LAUREATE
LONDONDERRY, NEW HAMPSHIRE, JULY 2020

Note: The poets were invited to write a vignette about how COVID-19 affected their town during the month of April 2020. These fascinating glimpses into a shared moment in time appear after each poem in the book.

COVID Spring

Robert Manchester

DREAMING IN THE TIME OF THE VIRUS

He enters a house that is not his and although there are people there he ignores them and they stay in other rooms. As he tries to leave he finds that one door is blocked by a river and another opens only to a big drop-off. But, in the next second he is seated on the ground opposite a familiar blonde woman who stays a *social distance* apart from him, and he wonders if this is because of the *plague* or because she only wants friendly talk and nothing more. With extended arm she offers one of her two last cigarettes which he refuses. And, when he awakes in the early morning it dawns on him that he is alone. No one with him in his bed, his house empty, but familiar to him . . . no rivers behind, no doors that do not lead to steps, and he is glad he refused the cigarette since he no longer smokes.



Concord became a place of early morning and evening empty streets, lines at Market Basket winding up through the parking lot, protesters dressed in camo and carrying guns.

Anna Birch

ON THE DAY THE PANDEMIC IS DECLARED

The trucks arrive and take down
the century trees out front,
rooted rock maples
James and Mary planted
when they built this house.

Insistent on their destruction
my mother speaks out against ruin
against porous rot, punk wood,
limbs that might fall on the children.

There is no blessing,
no sitting beside the dying.
I park in the back,
try not to watch from my windows
as the canopy is dropped piece by piece.
Even the early spring lawn,
so pale, seems offended.

It takes too long.
I pace the kitchen, scramble to keep busy—
then run from the house into the flurry
and growing disquiet of town,
crowded stores, frantic buying.

And now even the air feels different.
We have made an untenable mistake,
knowing these old ones
could have relayed something
arcane and wise.

Halfway through the cut
the man said you could have fit a body
down into the middle of the trunk
and I wish I'd made them leave then
with their orange vests and cigarettes
and lowered myself inside what remained,
to listen, to remember
bark, root and filament.



After a surge of crowding, the walking trails of Hollis were closed in April at the request of emergency management. This meant some new faces in the center of town as folks took to walking the roads until the trails reopened. On Sunday nights throughout the spring, my husband played concerts on the church tower chimes, which rang out over the common and carried through town.

Mark DeCarteret

RYE 1A, APRIL 4, 2020

More so, I roam the margins, trying to make
another scene like one of Miro's microorganisms.
Teen lovers talk in mostly vowels at the outlook.
But the town butts in. A cruiser scaring up light.
Once was I'd chance the red-orange cones there
the color of a tiger's tongue or a thousand regrets,
now I don't involve the lungs in any telling at all.
I feel like a cartoon. Short on breath. Long on technique.
Never quite cut out to be this uncirculated, stuck.
All I can hear other than the farthest reach's soundtrack
are Massachusetts drivers revving the same verse
as the driver before them, cashiers droning orders,
and a sibilance so ancient it sees itself as a blessing.
It's a miracle these cars or these shacks or this ex-
cruciating static even has the desire to recreate itself.
Marsh-side, an ibis busies itself being an egret
and the egret subs as any bird not tucked away in a tree.
The sea lessens to a seal. Swears it's all about scale.
Where it backs off it's fax-white and where it doesn't
it's a negligible green, an old double downed blue.
Out in the distance the Shoals' losses are still ours.
All of us ghosts to go, tossed off and storm-soggy.
Hosts to everything restless, over-tired of the view.



All state beaches were closed along the Seacoast, so we walked along the shore road.