Reflecting on “our normal”

Opinions on the state of our humanity during the COVID-19 pandemic using three short stories: *Bloodchild*, *The Dark*, and *The Voice in the Night*

On April 9, I returned to campus to clear out my locker. As I approached the doors of the East Gate, I was greeted by signs of the times: “If you have any of the above symptoms, you are not permitted to enter”. I scanned my card and walked in the reluctantly admitting Lincoln Park building. The hallways once filled with abundant conversation, joyous laughter, and purposeful bustling were now quiet, empty, and cold. I have never experienced a period of such sustained and permeable fear. We humans are composed of a long and simple code, and the fear is part of our code. The code is not exclusive to us, however. It is shared by every living thing and by some things we consider to be either so degenerate or nascent that it isn’t alive at all. Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has a small code of only 30,000 base pairs in length, yet it has brought the engine of humanity to a grinding halt (Wu et al.). It has made us feel threatened. It has distanced us from each other. It has unleashed panic and horror. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is the manifestation of SARS-CoV-2 in humans. COVID-19 is a reminder of our fallibility. We are being forced to take a long look in the mirror. We have been reminded that we merely exist as overly assertive members of a homeostatic continuum; and we are driving this balance into disarray as our borders push the habitats of other species out of existence.

We are unconsenting symbionts to multitudes of organisms. Like the Terrans of Octavia Butler’s *Bloodchild*, we are the newcomers to this world. Our evolution and development has depended on competition, concession, and relentless negotiation with diverging species over millions of years. We are hosts to billions of microbial life forms who depend on us and we depend on them. While our symbiotic relationship seems less overtly socio-political than the
Terrans and the Tlic, the social and economic perturbations from this new parasitic virus have been undoubtedly vast. Butler narrates the story from the perspective of Gan, who is a young boy promised to T’Gatoi, a powerful political figure who maintains a preserve for the Terrans. This story exercises an interesting thought experiment where we are not the obvious dominant species within our domain. It resonates at a time when our culture and society has transformed so drastically and responsively to a parasitic threat. We don’t feel in control. We feel vulnerable. We have been driven back into our “preserves” by the threat of this virus.

This pandemic has shown us the core instinctual and reactionary intuition that perseveres despite our best attempts to mask it. It exists at every level of our society. Survival is our biggest drive. This experience has reminded us, “there is a darkness inside us all that is animal” (Fowler). When we feel threatened our animal instinct becomes our core priority. This is reflected by the hoarding of supplies and medicine. It is observed by lineups outside gun stores. This instinct is an essential mechanism for survival and keeps us alive day to day; but as a collective society, being driven by this survival-crazed mania has real and severe consequences. In *The Dark*, Karen Fowler eerily warns us of what can happen if we stray too far from ourselves to survive, because, “when men are turned into animals, it’s hard for them to find their way back to themselves” (Fowler). This text serves as a warning to everyone, especially our leaders, to be self aware of our actions and behaviors during times of adversity like these. We are only ever a thought or a decision away from propagating panic, fear, and our animal-like instinct to survive no matter the cost.

We have now begun our journey into a new normal way of living. We coexist with a viral parasite which has modified our behaviors and the ways we organize our lives. Without a vaccine or diffuse immunity, we are like the couple who were stranded on the fungus infested island in William Hope Hodgson’s *The Voice in the Night*. We have begun to realize our fate and
the importance of physical distancing to protect each other. Like the couple, recently we have, “sat together and talked awhile of many things for there had come into our lives sudden, very terrible thoughts.” (Hodgson). Most of us have asked ourselves and our leaders, “when will this end?” As uncomfortable as it may be to hear, maybe it won’t end for as long as we engage in unabated consumerism and greed. We must accept that we are bound to a growing fungus for as long as our priorities put the health of the planet behind our consumption.

During a special emergency convention of the Canadian Parliament on 11 April, 2019, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau addressed the members of Parliament and related the COVID-19 pandemic to the trials Canada has faced in wartime, except “...there is no front line marked by barbed wire. No soldiers to be deployed across the ocean… instead, the frontline is everywhere. In our homes, in our hospital and care centers...” (Trudeau). Handshakes, hugs, and kisses have become the weapons of this guerilla war. The enemy uses familiarity and affection to strike. But the enemy isn’t a conspiring and elusive group of rebels or a defiant nationalist movement bent on world domination. The enemy is a small piece of code which mutated in just the right way. This is not a war, either. It is a warning. As our boundaries push the rest of the living world to the brink of extinction, these events will happen more and more frequently. When we mold scientific exploration into a tool to be used only when we need it, we smother our ability to learn and prepare. The consequences are catastrophic, but they are also enlightening. This moment represents a fork in the road. It affords us time to reflect. As smog clears from the skies of cities around the world - a byproduct of this global shutdown - we are now forced to ask ourselves, “what are we doing?”.

References

Butler, Octavia E. Bloodchild: And Other Stories. 2 edition, Open Road Media Sci-Fi & Fantasy,
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2012.


