

The Quarantine Quatrains:

A new Rubaiyat by Malcolm Guite

1 Awake to what was once a busy day
When you would rush and hurry on your way
Snatch at your breakfast, start the grim
commute

But time and tide have turned another way.

2 For now, like you, the day is yawning wide
And all its old events are set aside
It opens gently for you, takes its time
And holds for you — whatever you decide.

3 This morning's light is brighter than it seems
Your room is rafted with its golden beams
The bowl of night was richly filled with sleep
And dawn's left hand is holding all your
dreams

4 Your mantle clock still sounds its silver chime
The empty page invites an idle rhyme
This quarantine has taken many things
But left you with the precious gift of time

5 Your time is all your own — yet not your own
The rose may open, or be overblown
So breathe in this day's fragrance
whilst you may
To each of us the date of death's unknown.

6 Then settle at your desk, uncap your pen
And open the old manuscript again
The empty hours may tease you
out of thought
Yet leave you with a poem now and then.

13 Some days I am diverted by a call:
The soft computer chime that summons all
To show a face to faces that we meet
Mirages, empty mirrors on the wall.

14 Alas that all the friends we ever knew
Whose lives were fragrant and whose touch
was true
Can only meet us on some little screen
Then zoom away with scarcely an adieu.

15 We share with them the little that we know
These galleries of ghosts set in a row
They flicker on the screen of life awhile
But some have left the meeting long ago.

16 We used to stroll together on the green
Who now divide the squares upon the screen,
The faces of our friends, so far apart
Tease us with tenderness that might have been

17 Some day we'll break the bread,
we'll pour the wine
And meet and kiss and feast beneath the vine,
Till then we'll sweeten solitude with verse
And yearn through pain, and watch each day
decline.

28 They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried
and drank deep:
But now in every corner of the world
The wild things flourish whilst the cities sleep

29 For when they see our influence abate
The banished creatures soon
resume their state:
Blithe dolphins sport along the grand canal,
Coyotes call across the golden gate.

30 The grass grows green in every city square,
The little foxes, once so shy and rare,
Saunter our streets and boulevards by day
Whilst birds and insects throng the cleaner air

31 How soon the tide of nature has returned
How soon renew the forests that we burned
How soon they seed and repossess our streets
Those precious plants and animals we spurned.

32 Perhaps in all this crisis, all this pain,
This reassessment of our loss and gain
Nature rebukes our brief authority
Yet offers us the chance to start again

33 And this time with a new humility,
With chastened awe, and mutual courtesy;
To re-accept the unearned gift of life
With gratitude, with joy and charity.

34 Perhaps we'll learn to live without so much
To nurture and to cherish, not to clutch,
And, if I'm spared, I'll hold the years I'm given
With gentler tenure and a lighter touch.