

## **Tendrils of Hope**

*Seni Seneviratne\**

It is January 2021, and as I write this, we are going into another national lockdown in the UK. I am finding it hard to comprehend that we are in a New Year. The year, 2020 seems in some ways to have passed by without anything other than Covid 19 happening in the world though, in reality, so much more has happened. This pandemic has highlighted the extent of global inequality and the need to address issues of poverty, injustice, racism and the impact of climate change across the world.

And how has all this impacted on me as a writer as well as a global citizen? On March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020, I wrote in my journal, “There is in the air the smell, the essence, the aura of Spring, which brings with it a kind of lifted spirit – a kind of hope.” How soon would I realise the importance of holding onto those tendrils of hope in the difficult months that have followed. Ten days later I wrote, “There is a virus travelling the world with no regard for borders, focusing everyone’s attention on health, hygiene, who is vulnerable and who may or may not survive the illness that it brings. The news informs us that economic markets are crashing. Everything is closing down. People stand three steps away from each other in public places. We are told to work from home if possible. I acknowledge how fortunate I am: a writer who always works from home and old enough to receive a state pension as some guarantee of income. At the same time, my heart goes out to all those on zero hours contracts who have no guarantees and worry

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about how they will put food on the table; to all the front-line workers who are required to be at work caring for the sick and the dying; to fellow workers in the Arts sector who rely on public events for their income; and across the world, to all those in refugee camps, all those struggling to survive and now faced with this additional threat. Every day I offer gratitude for the gift of running water.”

Within a week, my sense of gratitude was overtaken by anxiety. My daughter caught the virus and was quarantined with her family, an hour drive away from me. I would normally have been there, but, in the weeks that followed, I had to hear about the progress of her illness from a distance. Thankfully, she recovered without any long-term damage to her lungs. There was gratitude then for her recovery. Time again to notice my life become quieter, more measured. And yet, in these spaces, I was finding it hard to continue with any writing projects, wanting only to write down the moments as they happened. Nature and my writer’s eye kept me going with its tendrils of hope. “On a woodland walk a yew tree opens its bark to me like the page of a book.”

Thankfully I wasn’t one of the many people facing this time of isolation alone since I live with a loving partner. I was blessed too by the privilege of our growing garden making its way into Spring, with the first sight of the tulips. The daily news informed me of the growing death toll, across the world, and the continuing impact of the virus alarmed me, but I felt removed from the heart of the storm. Then on March 31<sup>st</sup>, everything came closer to home with the news that my dear sister-in-law had died after a long struggle with Alzheimer’s. My grief was all the more painful with the realisation that I couldn’t be with my brother at such a time nor attend the funeral.

In the midst of all this, I found some tranquillity in the simple tasks of the day: walks in nature, preparation of food, tending the garden. I attempted to write poems, but words eluded me or felt inadequate. Then one day in April, four days before our anniversary, as I watched my beloved carving birds in the garden, I told myself, “You have four days to write a poem for her.” “Ghazal,” the first completed poem since my last book, was a milestone, but not enough to soothe my crisis of confidence as a writer. The year 2020 had been planned as a year to promote my recently published book, *Unknown Soldier*. But readings had been cancelled, festivals didn’t go ahead and the feedback that would normally keep me in touch with that belief in myself as a writer had been absent. But how could I complain? This felt like nothing in the face of what many people were dealing with.

I needed something to feed my soul in the absence of the crafting of poetry and it came to me as a gift: the opportunity to work with clay again. In the summer, I found a shared studio space with access to kilns and began to make solid things, relishing the feel of clay between my fingers. In the Autumn, poems began to arrive again. Some of them crafted from journal writings, others appearing like long lost friends out of the blue. Poems about the times I couldn't write. Poems about birds and breathing and light keeping. And a poem for my sister-in-law about that funeral I never attended.

### **GHAZAL: HEARTSEASE\***

Words out of reach, caught on the rambling rose  
In the sycamore tree, but this place brings its heartsease.

A circle of grass, blueberries grown for my pleasure.  
Clematis climbing an arch curved like wings, it's heartsease.

Your quiet presence in the red and ochre of my present.  
A growing garden between us, promising Spring's heartsease.

The roses were always for you, now they grace the life we share.  
Look, the lush profusion of the Poet's Wife sings its heartsease.

And now this Poet, watching my beloved's hands work wood  
recalls the gold of oak and beech on wedding rings: its heartsease.

### **ARE YOU WRITING?**

I would write but one side of the page  
keeps slipping below the water level.  
Diving's not my thing, or I'd practice  
going under and anyway doesn't paper  
have a tendency to float? I see it rising  
to the surface, but alas too near  
to the propellers of my boat to risk  
me hanging over for a safe retrieval.

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\* All poems © Seni Seneviratne.

These days only clay makes sense,  
my fingers, sticky with the substance of it  
try to feel their way back to something –  
once my habit. It's been wearing thin.  
I make vessels that become more fragile  
as they dry. They need fire for strength.

**FOR TERESA**  
**16 April 2020**

Because I cannot be at your funeral, I make an altar  
in my living room: an oak table with indigo shawl,

a lit candle on a birch holder with a heart in its bark.  
I gather camellias – the petals fall, the way you fell

quietly away after all the sorrow of the incremental  
losing of you, all the living with your present absence.

I send my love out to the broken heartache of them  
a circle of held hands around the space you have left.