

## **COVID ID Fellow Wellness Session #2: Using Poetry to Discuss Shared Experiences**

(Pieces suggested by Dr.Rafael Campo – Editor, Poetry Section JAMA)

### **Calm before the Storm**

Between the Brattle and the bookstore  
A hundred yards of wet brick pavement  
Fancy with yellow leaves: I wore  
A red jacket, carried a red umbrella  
Had a little fever, had a little cough  
Was alive, passed a newspaper box  
Saw no wars in the headlines  
Had no bad news from the doctor  
Not yet, was alive, was in love  
Had waterproof boots on, it was only  
A few yards to the bookstore  
On an autumn night, the bookstore  
Full of good books and yellow light, I was  
Still alive, there was no evidence  
Of terminal illness, there were no wars  
In the headlines, I have always  
Loved the fall, the beautiful dead  
Bodies of the leaves scattered  
On the battlefield of earth and my own  
Life persisting.

--Mary B. Campbell

from *Trouble*, Carnegie Mellon Press, 2003

### **Themes we discussed:**

- Rapidly cycling between happiness and despair
- The gift of feeling safe
- Appreciating the safety and protection of the calm more in retrospect when you have experienced the storm
- Importance of finding the moments of safety (the bookstore with the yellow light) amidst the present danger

### The Embrace

You weren't well or really ill yet either;  
just a little tired, your handsomeness  
tinged by grief or anticipation, which brought  
to your face a thoughtful, deepening grace.  
I didn't for a moment doubt you were dead.  
I knew that to be true still, even in the dream.  
You'd been out—at work maybe?—  
having a good day, almost energetic.  
We seemed to be moving from some old house  
where we'd lived, boxes everywhere, things  
in disarray: that was the *story* of my dream,  
but even asleep I was shocked out of the narrative  
by your face, the physical fact of your face:  
inches from mine, smooth-shaven, loving, alert.  
Why so difficult, remembering the actual look  
of you? Without a photograph, without strain?  
So when I saw your unguarded, reliable face,  
your unmistakable gaze opening all the warmth  
and clarity of —warm brown tea—we held  
each other for the time the dream allowed.  
Bless you. You came back, so I could see you  
once more, plainly, so I could rest against you  
without thinking this happiness lessened anything,  
without thinking you were alive again.

--Mark Doty

from *Sweet Machine*, HarperCollins, 1998

### Themes we discussed:

- Loss of loved ones
- Fear for our own loved ones—many of whom are also healthcare workers
- Imperfection of memory—difficulty remembering the appearance of the beloved--Do families experience this even more as they are physically separated from the dying of their loved ones?

## *After the Shipwreck*

Lost, drifting, on the current, as the sun pours down  
Like syrup, sinking into afternoon,

The raft endlessly rocks, tips, and we say to each other:  
Here is where we will store the rope, the dried meat, the  
knife,

The medical kit, the biscuits and the cup.  
We will divide the water fairly and honestly.

Black flecks in the air produce dizziness.  
Somebody raises a voice and says: Listen, we know there  
is land

Somewhere, in some direction. We must know it.  
And there is the land, looming, mountainous, massive

On the horizon: there in our minds. Then nothing  
But the beauty of ocean,

Numberless waves like living, hysterical heads,  
The sun increasingly magnificent,

A sunset wind hitting us. As the spray begins  
To coat us with salt, we stop talking. We try to remember.

--Alicia Ostriker

from *Poetry, July 1979*

Themes we discussed:

- It feels like we are all together adrift at sea
- The strong will to survive this and to keep each other safe
- Importance of fair and just of distribution of resources
- The knowledge that we will find the other side of this somewhere at some time, but for now there will be waves, hysteria
- There is beauty to be found in the waves if we look for it