

*Virus Conversations*  
*poems from the hepatitis C epidemic by Michele Leavitt*

*Disease is not of the body but of the place.*

--*Seneca the Elder*

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## Viral Sestina

We  
attach  
ourcells  
to  
living  
you.

You,  
we  
living  
to  
attach  
ourselves.

Ourcells.

You  
attack,  
too.  
We,  
living,

living  
ourcells,  
we  
to  
you  
attach,

attach  
living  
you  
to

ourcells.

We,

we  
attach  
ourselves  
to  
living  
you.

Attached, living  
too, ourcells,  
yourcells, we.

## The Virus on Blind Emigration

we  
who can  
not see paths  
of distribution  
seeds floating on a wave we learn  
to trust whatever currents carry us what tidal

flux  
vacuum  
syringe  
hypodermic pin  
powers blood in powers blood out  
strands us lands us in glassy tubes and needles we learn

to  
trust each  
pause before  
each plunge each vector  
each path and bridge we cannot see  
each anonymous host each warm reliable wave

## The City Strategizes

If gods express their wrath by visiting  
their herds with plagues, then we are bound to take  
precautions, ostracize the ones who bring  
their souls to sickness through their sins and break  
old rules against unbridled wanting – whores  
and addicts, riff-raff, white trash, the lower class  
with bone-knobs poking out through skin, and sores  
and wretched, oozing scabs. Don't call us passé.

Common sense and science, evolution –  
survival of the fittest – all say avoid  
the sick; we aren't talking superstition  
here. Not entirely. Mercies destroyed

other states. We're not such timid clods.  
We make the rules; we are now the gods.

## Citizen A's short history of addiction

*All around the mulberry bush  
The monkey chased the weasel;  
The monkey thought 'twas all in fun. . .*

The monkey piggybacks  
when you're still young  
cough syrup sweet as berries  
on the tongue  
when drunk directly  
from the amber bottle  
rather than the spoon  
that makes a comeback  
after Librium solutions  
for rebellion, boilermaker  
cups of everything after  
bottles of Boone's Farm  
wine smashed then wasted  
marijuana rolled in  
strawberry papers thinner  
than white blotter acid  
test this someone says  
it's the best stuff ever  
when the flame  
under the dope-spoon  
flares the metal blue  
poke goes the needle  
mulberry  
monkey  
weasel.

## The Virions Strategize

*us*  
as  
greedy  
invaders  
*colonizing your*  
lives silly we're invisible to  
naked eyes content to squat in corners of your cells

we  
thrive  
but you  
authorize  
massive genocides  
our lives are sacred slow and mild  
our footprints take decades to show up in your body

on  
our  
micro  
scale decades  
mean millennia  
try to deny our right to life  
try we will pantomime submission while genotypes

wait  
mate  
mutate  
conjugate  
translate infiltrate  
reduplicate accumulate  
we do not gradually reproduce -- we replicate

## The City Confesses Its Mistakes

Mistakes? We simply don't make any.  
That's the beauty of a collective vision.  
It has been ever so: we strengthen  
by insisting on homogeny.

And we protect our own.  
No one is harmed but the white goat  
we tied to a tree beyond the moat,  
the one we all get to stone.

## Citizen C Bargains with the Gods

I hear *Appease Me* in the rush of air that fills  
the void left by catastrophe, my fear of sequels  
balanced by a brash belief I might prevent

a dreadful fate. The gods demand, and sometimes get,  
the fatted calf, the son who's reached his prime. I play  
the odds and offer up what's tainted, hoping half-

assed sacrifice will do: "Take my stash of dis-  
used lusts," I say, "or here, this rooster nearly pecked  
to death by hens, or someone else's goat, or here –

my brother's wife, who switches off between the crack-  
pipe and the Valium, who drags her kids behind  
her all the way to prison. *Burn these things*," I pray,

"*and spare the blameless ones.*" The children suffer while  
I warm my witch's hands before the blaze. My heart-  
stone pulls me to my knees, but it's my mouth, that knows

full well the pleasure of its spites and blames,  
that tastes the iron bit of my infected state,  
that fills with spittle, thirsty for the flames.

## The Virus Mimics Mistakes

Mistakes? We simply cannot make any  
in our amoral existence,  
and we cannot experience  
regret for shames you craft or carry,

provoked – not by us – but by your own  
mistaken myth that consequence  
can be controlled. We cannot make sense  
of eagerness to throw that first stone.

## Citizen H loses a brother

You said whatever's sacred escapes  
with us—escape being sacred,  
elusive and pervasive, the sacred  
point. You said that's how water escapes –

it possesses no compression point –  
but our bond wouldn't seep away like water  
since blood is thicker than water.

My blood escaped, the sticking point

between infections in our case.

I shared too much with you,  
but we didn't stick together. You  
proved vulnerable, an incurable case,

and then I wore Cain's skin, refusing grief,  
while you played Abel, dying at my feet.

The door to you locked shut. You're now my keeper,  
the Lord having committed me to life.

## Viral Documentary

try  
to  
tell us  
who we are  
our history  
as if we are the oppressed ones

we  
will  
foreground  
your voices  
in our own counter  
narratives of your oppression

*the  
wild  
genome  
was first cloned  
1989  
for diverse research purposes*

*the  
wild  
virus  
has quite an  
extraordinary  
genetic diversity since  
its error-prone replication  
process creates so many adaptive mutations*

*a*

*light  
buoyant  
infectious  
form is coated with  
serum beta-lipoproteins*

*to  
help  
mask it  
from the host  
immune response but  
that's still an emerging concept*

*we  
know  
different  
genotypes  
will vary in their  
responsiveness to therapy*

*and  
such  
heter  
ogeni  
ty hinders the dev  
elopement of vaccines since vac  
cine antigens from multiple serotypes will prob  
ably be necessary for global protection*

## The City's Ode to Skin

Skin, keep our people separate from each other –  
a helix of fallen leaves in yellow, and black,  
and pale, and hectic red – although we know  
they are the one tree's vivid myriad.

You, skin, are the canvas of their differences,  
the surface argument against their sameness  
when the tree insists on roots. Clothe them  
in throwaway garments. Keep us blameless.

Citizen E says, *Even though my body wants to cleave in two to hold her*

driftwood jams the riverbends as if  
stacked up for a bone-fire of the gods.  
I whisper baby's name to wake her, make  
her take her bottle, juice and syrup laced

with Phenobarbital to still her seizures.  
I love her chubby skin, like butter left  
in sun, if butter would not melt. She will  
not wake and cannot hold her head up, though

she's twelve months old, though now I see the driftwood  
angles up toward stars as if it points toward  
hope, as if it's true that God or time  
combines mistakes to make a thing of beauty.

I made her. I am guilty. I am thirsty.  
Sometimes I think a fire would be a mercy.

## Viral Ode to Blood

O lift us as a wave, a leaf,  
a conduit. Imprint us with  
your codes and tell us when we seem  
off-base in our translational

cleavage with your own proteases,  
and fail to yield viral proteins.  
Be our perfect host of red seas,  
parting for no genome but us.

## Citizen D says, bring me waterlilies

we lay on the damp sand bank of a pond and when the heat of day threatened to erase us we dove below the water's first few feet of warmth following the tethered stems of waterlilies rooted in mud we loved oblivion so much we didn't want to miss one minute of it we fought the nods our heads bobbing in their wake we swam but he went further out than i did circling the acres of the pond returning with buds of waterlilies saved from drowning i floated on my back one blossom wedged between my breasts night fell we saw the true moon float on the pond's surface a disk rooted in deep water its appearance in the sky a mere reflection we were raised by strangers and we had no blood kin we heard oblivion calling from our veins we looked for more we scored he fixed me and then he fixed himself near dawn we fell asleep near waves his sex slipped like the lily bud inside my sex that opened the lilies browned and rotted on my window sill we fell apart but still he stays inside me like a pulse of sand and pond and blossoming the virus blossoms 'til we die i was like him when we lived like waterlilies both spawned and drowned by where deep night is

## The City Divides the Citizens

For the pool of innocent victims, like you,  
we built this pool. You were infected through no fault  
of your own, back when only the virus knew it existed.  
Some of you were only children. Swim

with those like you, who took the transfusions,  
and with those guilty of only minor carelessness,  
the health care workers whose fingers slipped  
against infected needles that pricked like spindles.

Swim in our clear water, with the blue buoys  
and the white life-rings. We promise you can sleep and not drown.

We promise you a pool of innocent victims  
means a pool of guilty victims, since it is

*immoral to teach people how to avoid a disease  
transmitted by something they should not*

*have been doing in the first place.* You people  
swimming in that hole on the outskirts of town,  
paddling through the flotsam of floating needles,  
crack pipes, and semen, lost jobs, and stagnant regrets,

You made that pool.  
Now swim in it.

## The Citizens Speak to the City

Think of us  
as fishes, split off from the school,  
and love us now.

If not, only winter waits.  
If not winter, winter's grave.  
If not winter's grave,

winter's grave windowpane: a pond's thick glaze  
from which our million fish-eyes  
stare, frozen and unblinking,

up at you, our unteachable sun.

Citizen O meditates on *rosa rugosa*

Spring tides wash out wrinkles in the Dead  
Creek's banks, but I'm past wishing for a cure  
for creases on my face. It's me and my  
disease out here; we wait for passing gifts  
that seem consistent with infirmity.

This spiky branch of beach rose winter cast  
to sea-- a typical calamity—

will do. The creek has swept it back to land.

Collage is what the old are good at, after  
all; we twist what's new with dried regrets.

This rose branch, brined by tides, has kept some hips;  
I'll jam it in this vase with redbud tips.

## The Virus Questions the Citizens

why  
do you  
praise your fixed  
individual  
nature when to be fixed means you  
were once flawed indivisible as if your body

does  
not long  
to fix to  
others in its lust  
for fusion as if your flesh is  
not divisible by death's decay how can you count

us  
as the  
invaders  
uncountable points  
in the vast, unaccountable  
galaxy of your body as if you alone are

one  
distinct  
rather than  
another point of  
uncountable life in one more  
spiraling unaccountable spangled universe

## The City on Blind Luck

The earthworms burrowed out from thawing slop  
last week to bask in hundreds on the asphalt,  
converging where the sun's warmth stuck like fault.  
Then night dropped down to slay them where they lay  
unthinking, wet, and glistening under stars.  
The cold night and its shining captain, frost,  
arrested them until they lay quite stiff.  
Their worm-slime crystallized, as white as salt.

This morning, light advances west again,  
a cinematic wave of cavalry  
to rescue the lucky few who have survived.  
These writhe inside their rime chrysalides,  
then wriggle out, as if the night, the ice  
held no dominion over them. As if.

Citizen T, before he faded

Palmetto shadows sway outside the window  
near my bed. The sun goes down and Ann,  
the nurse from hospice, unexpectedly  
a friend because she'd been a dope fiend too  
(I knew her from a Monday meeting), cuts  
the light on. Then it's me in that window, propped up  
on pillows, staring like a mangy possum  
from an unchecked trap. I haven't said  
a word in weeks, but now I hiss and moan,  
and she reminds me I've been whittled down,  
once a man of six foot four, my solid chest  
a place where men and women both had laid  
their heads. I held people up – the good way –  
assuring them their fucked-up shames would fade  
like mine did – and the world pulsed with light  
those times, the shadow light that brightens now  
to fade what colors of my shames can make me.  
Ann reaches in and pries the spring trap open,  
until I'm clear, until I say *come take me*.

## Citizen X to Pandora

Because we are alike – both women scorned,  
defined by our mistakes, and women whose  
mistakes hurt others, whose otherness has turned  
us speechless – we know the story's other side:

God made the jar. He filled it. Then, he lied:

*It's full of gifts for all mankind. Good news!*

And you, in innocence, believed. You pried  
it open. A host of miseries unfurled

before you slammed it shut with Hope inside,  
a doughy, unarmed caterpillar curled  
beneath the lip. Pandora, my body is what  
I opened. Disease is what I spread. I shut

my mouth and chew on hope. It's not about  
to grow its wings. I cannot spit it out.

## The City Hears Bachman's Warbler

Extinct for decades due  
to habitat destruction, only fools  
held out hope –

then we, ourselves, overheard  
a mockingbird, repeating Bachman's Warbler's  
song, a thrilling, zeeping trill –

so which would be the greater miracle –  
survival of a fragile species, or  
survival of its common song?

And does the question mean  
that we grow equal to such purpose --  
to keep on singing once the singer's gone?

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