

A Raging Pandemic

The year 2020. A raging pandemic, a citywide lockdown and a flood of emotional turmoil.

A gauze of uncertainty blurred my visions of the future—a debating championship in Singapore, writing competitions that had piqued my interest, stacks of books, gathering dust.

I remember those months of lockdown, cooped up in the anxiety of waiting for a return to normalcy, the restlessness that robbed my books and manuscripts of their magic, leaving them nothing more than dry paper.

With nowhere else to look to, my only emotional outlet was my stories. In isolation, I envisioned medical wards with plastic sheaths and laboured breathing. The feeling that time has moved on incalculably in the silent homes that have become prisons and trenches. The nostalgia, a potent drug that deludes us with wistful yearning for the past. My mind transformed imagery into stories.

I dreamed of a medical worker who finds meaning in his profession while overburdened with horror. I envisioned humanity as a mariner who opened Pandora's Box of corruption and failure, compelled to persevere only by hope. I travelled to London in the guise of a seventeen-year-old who suffers the loss of a guiding figure, whose grief was eerily reminiscent of our collective pain as we keep surviving a pandemic.

Margaret Atwood told us that the act of storytelling is 'an act of hope: every recorded story implies a future reader'. Anne Frank recorded her story during the unfathomable horror of the Holocaust; Erich Maria Remarque chronicled the filthy and pointless tragedy of the First World War in *All Quiet on the Western Front*; many who lived during the Black Death kept journals.

Our love of fiction comes from a desire for escapism: we can look at the dystopias in our books and reassure ourselves that it can never happen here. 2020 proves that it can always happen here.

Prior to 2020, I thought of my stories as entertainment; in lockdown, they became a process of healing. Now, I think of them as a form of witness. Yes, we are emerging from the crisis; but sooner or later the pandemic will become history, and we will once again become deaf to the dire warnings that resonate within the pages. Linguists keep the log books—it is our form of resilience. But it means nothing if we do not decipher the codes that we call language.

